

Broken Dreams

Note: For those of you who skipped The Loss of Innocence, one thing you'll need to know in particular is the circumstances surrounding Patricia. Early in TLoI, she started following Tsukasa around and got on her nerves, and this culminated in Tsukasa giving her a no-holds-barred beatdown, literally adding insult to injury later when she was brought by her family to the nurse's office to apologize to her. Patricia retaliates by vandalizing the family shrine with some others and creating even more of a stigma for the family until she is exposed by Konata and Hiyori and subsequently expelled and incarcerated.

CHAPTER 1

She struggled to scrub her body clean of the presumed filth as she let the boiling water scorch her. It didn't have to happen the way it did last night, but it did nonetheless. If only she didn't fight back. If only she had just laid on her back and let him do what he wanted as usual, then it wouldn't have hurt. Instead of a night of passionate and physical intimacy, she couldn't help but feel that she was violated, but she was in a committed relationship. People who are in love don't do those things to each other, right?

Kagami Hiiragi tried to comprehend such questions as she trembled in her mind while washing herself. As if this wasn't stressful enough, today was the big day for her law firm. Today she was determined to become one of the most influential lawyers in Asia as she planned to meet with the CEO of a medical equipment corporation. They were planning a merger with her law firm which meant not only new clients

for Kagami, but also large paychecks and financial security for the rest of her life. The only problem was she would have to share it with someone she feared.

As she stepped out of the shower and walked to the fogged mirror, she wiped the condensation away and saw herself. She had a bruise around her neck from her lover's mighty grasp from last night. Sighing at the heart-wrenching sight, she began to cover it with blush and shifted her body to where she could see the top of her back, the rest covered with a towel. Her heart beat when she saw more marks on her skin from a belt. Her lover's belt.

Koichi Shido. That was the name of the man she thought she was in love with. A fellow lawyer like herself, Shido was everything a law firm would look for in an attorney. He was a people person, had sharp social and speaking skills, analytical skills...and most desired of all...he was a pure psychopath underneath. He had the uncanny ability to not feel compassion or integrity for anyone or anything, making him perfect for both careers in law and politics.

Kagami remembered the day she first met him two years ago. It wasn't too long after she had returned home to Saitama after visiting New York City to see an old friend at a convention. She met him at a conference in Tokyo and he took an immediate shine to her, though Kagami remained indifferent about his advances since she couldn't get her old friend out of her head. One drink and conversation led to another and Kagami soon had to admit that she was charmed by Shido. Though still reluctant to take him up on an offer for a date, Kagami later received an email from one of her sisters, who was busy touring the world with her family and seeing her with her husband and two children made the oldest Hiiragi twin envious. She wanted someone of

her own too, which swayed her decision to become Koichi Shido's girlfriend.

She had no idea she would soon be sleeping with the enemy as Shido knew who Kagami was and had no interest in a sincere relationship with her. Instead, he wanted everything she worked so hard to build herself. He wanted her firm.

Hypnotized by the audible gold he was able to express that wooed everyone else in his words, he was able to trick Kagami into not only going out with him, but also making him an associate in her firm. Kagami never wanted to do that. She knew firsthand that the world of law was full of cut-throats and backstabbers but still, she couldn't help but think that Shido was different.

He...he doesn't mean it. He loves me. I'm the one that needs to be better. Why can't I be the woman he deserves?

Kagami was confused in her mind as her eyes flooded with tears when she lowered her towel and revealed all the belt marks across her body. She had been whipped by this monster relentlessly for...of all crimes...standing up to him when he said something bad about her family.

I deserved this. I deserved to be whipped.

Kagami put herself together in the mirror and slipped on her work clothes, anxious to meet the CEO today and make a great impression

with Shido by her side. She was blinded by what she thought was love. At one point, Kagami wondered why she was staying with this animal. The more she thought about it, it felt like she was staying with him out of necessity. Her oldest and youngest sisters were both married and had children with the middle Hiiragi daughter, Matsuri, as the only exception. Matsuri cited her religious duties as her reasons why she was still single.

I need to become a respectable woman. I need to get married and bear children...just like I'm supposed to. I'm a woman after all.

Her thoughts were suddenly shattered and her heart leaped into her throat when Kagami felt a fist pounding on her bathroom door. It was followed up by an angry voice calling, "Hurry up, Kagami. You know what I'll do to you if you make us late again!"

"Ye...yes dear." She whimpered.

She heard his footsteps walk away. Sweating and her heart pounding, Kagami felt her knees quake. She was scared. She was afraid of this man, a trait that she never felt before. Kagami was one of the strongest women out there, yet Shido had completely crawled inside her head and defeated her from the inside, out. She no longer felt confident or pride. She only felt fear and second-guessed herself every second of every day. She was unknowingly playing into Shido's sinister plan to take over her firm.

Assembling her professional wardrobe over her body, Kagami slowly exited the bathroom and into the bedroom of her penthouse apartment, the one she used to live alone in. Shido was living with her, just another part of his twisted mind taking over all aspects of Kagami's life. She shuffled into the kitchen, where she saw him eating the breakfast she had cooked for him earlier before she took a shower.

He glanced up. Koichi Shido was a tall and slender man with black hair that nearly covered his eyes and was clean shaven. He wore black-framed glasses that made him look even more haunting as his glare burned Kagami.

"You undercooked the eggs, again. I've eaten dirt that tasted better than this." He snapped.

Kagami formed a nervous fist and held it in front of her chest, as if she was trying to defend her heart against her boyfriend's harsh words. "I...I'm sorry. I...I did the best I could. Maybe I could take a few classes and—"

"Forget it. I'm not spending money on a lost cause like you." Shido snarled. "Get your shit and let's go. You better not screw up, Kagami."

Kagami nodded nervously and collected her briefcase containing all the documents she needed for the meeting with the CEO today. As they walked out of the apartment, Shido made another physical effort at taking down Kagami's confidence by violently smacking her on the buttocks as she

walked past him, making her yelp in pain as the smack echoed across the hallway. Shido's only response was to laugh.

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Arriving at Kagami's law firm office in Tokyo, she and Shido walked through the busy building, each one getting both sincere greetings and confused looks. All of Kagami's workers could see that Shido was no good for her and if baffled them all to see that Kagami either couldn't or wouldn't see it. Regardless, they treated their boss kindly as they all respected her immensely as Kagami approached her office and a familiar face from high school.

A woman her age was sitting at a desk next to Kagami's office door, acting as her secretary. The familiar face was that of Ayano Minegishi. Her sparkling blue eyes lit up when she saw Kagami approach.

"Good morning, Kagami." She said happily.

The gloomy Kagami became happy again when she saw her friend and nodded. "Good morning to you, Ayano."

"Mr. Kawazu is inside your office and waiting for you." Ayano said. "You're going to do great. Good luck."

Kagami nodded with a smile and entered her office as Shido followed. When they disappeared, Ayano shot a glare at Shido, a rarity for her. She too knew that Shido was a depraved individual but regardless remained quiet for Kagami's sake. Every time someone would try and confront Kagami on the fact that she was dating a sleaze-ball, she would become defensive and defend Shido.

Her heart pounding in her chest, Kagami sat down at her desk, Shido sitting next to her in his own desk. Kagami remembered when she used to occupy this spacious office by herself but those days were over as far as Shido was concerned. Looking across the table at Mr. Kawazu, he was an older man in his late sixties but dressed in a very expensive suit and held a confident look on his face. He wanted a merger with Kagami's firm, but didn't want to merge with a firm that was led by a weak lawyer. Kawazu was smart enough and in the game long enough to know that a weak lawyer would be eaten alive in no time and as a result, both their companies would tank. He was going to protect his business no matter what.

Kagami could feel the pressure now. She was nervous...very nervous. She began to breathe hard and sweat began to form across her head as she stammered. Shido glanced down at Kagami as she struggled and now he became nervous. He wanted to break her down but only to the point where he could control her, not to the point where Kagami couldn't even control herself. This was bad.

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Dinner that night between the two lovers and partners was painfully quiet. They didn't get the deal. Kagami couldn't break through her nerves enough to win the elderly Kawazu over. Kagami pushed her food around on her

plate with her fork as Shido stared at the food, a permanent scowl fixed on his face.

"I...I'm sorry...about today...dear." Kagami wheezed, her voice still crackling from nerves.

Shido said nothing and didn't move.

"M...maybe next time." Kagami said. "Do...you...still...love me?"

Silence.

Kagami cleared her throat and slowly stood and collected her plate. She walked it over to the sink to clean it off and began to talk again. "I think I need to take a vacation. I was hoping you would let me go see my family. I know you said no last time but I heard that Tsukasa is going to—"

Kagami never got the chance to finish. A plateful of food flew past her head and missed her by an inch and shattered against the pantry next to the sink. She yelped again and quickly spun, only to be met with an open-handed slap by Shido across her face and Kagami fell to the tile floor and curled into a ball. Her body went into auto-pilot because regrettably, she had went through this before.

"You little bitch! You think you can just ruin this opportunity for me?! I worked too hard and too goddamn long to make it in this business to let a self-centered little whore like you cower in the face of a petty challenge!" Shido roared and lifted his foot and placed it on Kagami's hip, triggering her to cry as she pulled herself tighter. "You call yourself a lawyer?! I've met kids with Down Syndrome that would make better lawyers than you! And better speakers! This is why I'm staying in your life against my better judgment! You need me, Kagami Hiiragi! Without me your life is nothing and you'll wither and die alone!"

Shido bent down to her and grabbed her by her long hair and lifted her head up, making her wince more in pain as the tears continued to flow.

"I forbid you to see your family! Not until you learn how to speak properly and act like a rational human being!" Shido continued. "I'm going out for a bit and when I get back, I better see you on that bed because tonight I'm going to teach you a lesson you won't soon forget! Now cleanup this damn mess or you'll be sleeping in the trash!"

He released her hair and stormed out of the apartment, leaving the distraught Kagami on the floor. She slowly pulled herself onto her knees and began to clean the floor and when it was done, she moved towards the bedroom, still crying silently. Resting on the bed, she slowly reached under the mattress and pulled out an old picture. It was of her old high school class trip to Kyoto and it was of her, Konata, Tsukasa, and Miyuki in a photo booth that said "We love Kagame." The "e" was crossed out and replaced with an "i."

She stared at one of the people in the photo and muttered, "I miss you so much."

*For anyone who hasn't figured it out, yes, this is the sequel to Loss Of Innocence. Created by popular demand and couldn't help but feel inspired by hearing Skillet's song "The Last Night" which reminded me of Konata and Kagami's relationship in this story. Hope it'll surpass the first one!

CHAPTER 2

She was nervous sitting in the doctor's office. Konata Izumi had not been feeling well the past few days and it finally reached a point where she needed to make a doctor's appointment. She would wake up in the middle of the night gasping for air and sweating profusely, which was followed up by massive headaches and stomach aches. It wasn't until she coughed up several drops of blood one day that sealed the deal for an appointment. She was just hoping it was a viral infection, maybe even strep throat.

Konata sat in the waiting room of the doctor's office and began to think. She didn't even think to bring a manga to read as the only thing on her mind was her health since seeing that blood on her hand had scared her deeply. She remembered how she was so healthy and athletic in high school and now she couldn't help but think she had taken it for granted.

She shifted her green eyes around the room and was uncomfortable in her surroundings. An elderly man was sitting in one chair and looked as if he could fall over dead at any second as he coughed into a handkerchief. A young mother sat in another chair trying to wipe her struggling child's runny nose, a clear indicator the toddler had a bad cold. The only other sound in the room was the incessant sound of the secretary clawing away at her computer's keyboard while telephones also rang in the next room.

Another young man scratched at his itchy cast around his arm, adding more unnerving noise to the situation.

Konata suddenly remembered a dream she had last night. She dreamt of her mother, the late Kanata Izumi. She hadn't thought about her in a long time. For some reason, thinking about her departed mother made her more feel more uneasy since she sat in a doctor's office and hoped that the two occurrences were just a coincidence. She dreamt that both her and Kanata were together sitting under a peaceful tree in a grassy meadow on a summer day watching flowers dance in the field in front of them and they were both wearing the same white dress while holding each other.

Come to think of it, she hadn't talked to her father in a long time either. She had been very busy with her business partner, Hiyori Fukumoto, formerly known as Hiyori Tamura. They hadn't done any shows at anime conventions in awhile though and the two otaku artists feared that they were in a slump. Konata's mind jumped from one thought to another until a voice echoed in the living room.

"Izumi?" A nurse said.

Konata slowly looked up and saw a nurse holding her file and waiting for her. The short blue-haired woman followed the nurse into yet another isolated exam room where she was instructed to wait even longer for the doctor to see her. Now alone again, Konata wished her old friend Miyuki was with her. If only Miyuki wasn't in Sweden and back in Japan, then she could take care of Konata.

Fortunately, Konata didn't have to wait too long until a doctor entered the room. He was middle-aged with salt-and-pepper hair and a few wrinkly spots. "Ms. Izumi?"

Konata nodded.

"Good afternoon, ma'am. My name is Dr. Honda and I'll be examining you today. So, what can I do for you?" He asked kindly and readied his notepad and pen.

Konata was reluctant to answer until she forced herself to talk. "Well...I've been struggling to breathe recently, especially at night. I've also been having migraines at least twice a week and I can't eat certain foods without feeling sick to my stomach. Sometimes I have to vomit if I eat the wrong thing and worst of all, two days ago my throat was hurting really bad, like it was being cut up by little razor blades every time I breathed and I coughed up blood."

Dr. Honda froze and looked up. "Blood?"

Konata nodded, her nerves growing more strained.

"How much?"

"About twenty small spots."

Dr. Honda nodded. "Any family history of genetic diseases? Wilson's? Huntington's?"

Konata shook her head but added, "Well, my mother died when I was very little. My dad never liked to talk about it so I don't really know that much about it."

"What was your mother's name?"

"Kanata Izumi."

Dr. Honda made a note regarding the name. "Okay, Ms. Izumi. We're going to run a few tests so let's start with your lungs."

He readied his stethoscope and placed it on Konata's chest and began the exam. He then took some blood and urine samples from her, as well as setting up another appointment for an MRI. Hearing of all these "necessary" tests furthered Konata's discomfort and fear of potentially upsetting news. What made it worse was the fact that she would have to wait awhile for the results.

When the appointment was over and Konata stepped outside, it felt surreal. She felt that the appointment never even took place and that she had just awoken from a dream as she walked towards her car. She sighed in frustration upon seeing once again that her car door was nearly as tall as she

was and she opened the door and climbed into the sedan. Talking a deep breath, Konata fished in her purse for her cell phone and opened it, revealing one new voicemail.

Opening her voicemail, she listened to the outgoing message until her inbox sounded. "Hey Konata it's Hiyori. Just wanted to call and see how everything's going and was wondering if you wanted to join Akio and I for dinner and drinks tonight. Maybe we could discuss some new ideas for a new manga. Anyway, call me back when you get the chance."

Konata closed her phone and sighed again. The last thing she wanted was to be roped into dinner plans with her business partner and her husband. She felt so depressed, but why was she condemning herself before she even got the results of her medical tests? Maybe a nice meal and good company would do her well, but she couldn't shake this sinking feeling of nostalgia, as if she was missing something from her life. Something...or someone.

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Konata arrived back home at her spacious apartment in Tokyo. Anyone who knew her from high school would admit that it was a step up spacious wise from her old room in her father's house. She was still loaded with manga but kept a special room for that in her apartment, which was also where her computer sat where she continued to indulge herself in online games in her spare time. Another room in her apartment symbolized her maturity, which was her office where she came up with ideas for new manga. She had composition books and notepads stacked to the ceiling with ideas, characters, plots, settings, twists, and themes for any kind of story.

Konata strolled into her manga room and fired up her computer to kill some time and take her mind off a stressful day at the doctor's office. She opened her email and saw she got an email from an old friend, Tsukasa Shiraishi in Germany. It was a picture of a manga book and Konata couldn't help but smile when she realized it was a copy of one of her and Hiyori's works translated into German. Tsukasa also added a message to it.

Seems I bump into you no matter where I go! I know it has been awhile Konata but I hope we can talk again soon! Love you! Tsukasa.

"That's nice." Konata couldn't help but giggle to herself. "Good for you, Tsukasa. Good for you."

Konata spent the next hour gaming it up online and trying to keep her mind off her recent visit to the doctor. She even surprised herself when she couldn't even mentally make it past one hour until she decided that for the first time, she had had enough and stopped playing. It was official that Konata was stuck in a rut in all aspects and what made it worse was that she couldn't see a way out of it.

Konata Izumi stuck in a rut. Who would've thought it? This was the same person who never let anything get her down and was notorious for her unique personality that always seemed to give her an edge when everyone was down around her. The only other time Konata could remember in her lifetime that she was as upset as this was when she reminisced about Tsukasa's crumbling state after she was brutally raped all those years ago.

The lonely blue-haired girl sat on her bed, the room's ticking clock her only companion. She hugged her petite legs closer to her flat chest and sighed. The more she thought about her state, the more she wondered if it had anything to do with her mother or if that dream was trying to tell her something. She quickly glanced at her phone sitting on the nightstand next to her bed and contemplated picking it up and calling her father. This was something she hadn't done in awhile, not because the two weren't on speaking terms, but Konata had wrapped herself up so much in her career and dedication to the otaku culture that everything from her past seemed to have been pushed aside by her. She also feared that her father would tell her something about her mother that might justify her fears. As the old saying goes, "ignorance is bliss."

It suddenly came to her. Kagami Hiiragi. The one person that always seemed to cheer her up and was always there for her. She suddenly felt something. As soon as Konata thought about Kagami, her heart began to pound and her palms became moist as she trembled like a leaf, but why? The two may not have seen each other or spoke to each other for two years but maybe this was a sign for Konata to get into contact with her.

Konata slowly picked up her cell phone and opened her lengthy contact list. When she saw Kagami's number, she became more nervous. More nervous than when she was in the doctor's office. Her sweaty fingers began to lose the grip on her phone and as her quaking thumb moved closer to the "call" button on Kagami's number, she couldn't do it. Konata quickly closed the phone and dropped it, making it bounce on her floor and she gripped her head.

Running her hands through her long blue hair, she felt even more depressed but a few words suddenly came to her mind. If she couldn't tell Kagami these words that were swelling in her mind, she would write them. Reaching into her nightstand and pulling out a small notebook and a pen,

Konata began to write a few words. A few words turned into a few sentences. A few sentences turned into a few paragraphs until Konata realized she had written a poem about how she truly felt about Kagami.

Konata reread the entire thing to herself and gulped upon its completion.

This...this isn't right. Kagami...she's...she's just a friend. She's just a friend. Besides, I heard she has a man. What's wrong with me? I need to get my act together and find a man too.

Konata looked at her watch and realized she was overdue for dinner with Hiyori and her husband. She crumbled the paper and threw it into her trashcan and began to prepare herself by undressing and walking to bathroom for a shower. As she scrubbed herself, the words of her poem continued to bounce inside her head like pinballs in a lottery machine.

Hold my hands,

Touch my face.

Just hold me so I don't feel,

So out of place.

I wish I felt the way

You make me feel every day.

Without you I want to cry

And wish I could die.

When I look at you

I know what I desire.

I only want you.

You set my heart on fire.

I know my love for you

Will never end.

It's killing me inside

Just staying your friend.

Putting on a fake smile and displaying a counterfeit cheery attitude, Konata burst into Hiyori's house as vibrant as ever later that evening. She hugged her business partner and kissed her husband on the cheek as a show of friendship for him. Akio Fukumoto wasn't a very impressive man physically as he was only slightly taller than Hiyori but he was deeply entrenched in the otaku culture and allowed his black bangs to cover nearly his eyes and drift down over his ears. He was also an aspiring musician but it was clearly Hiyori who was the breadwinner in their household. It didn't matter to him though. He was married to a woman who was a self-proclaimed pervert and enjoyed yaoi and yuri. Most men would call that a winner.

It amazed even Konata that she could act cheerful and happy around her friend and business partner despite the troubles she was having in her head and the fear of uncertainty she was plagued with. Nevertheless, she was able to be her old self and graced everyone around her and because of her calm demeanor; the two artists were able to come up with new ideas and began to think of a new story.

When the get-together was over and Konata arrived back at her apartment later that night, she strolled into her bedroom, feeling much better about herself. It wasn't until she saw the green light on her phone on the nightstand blinking that she realized she had a message. Calling her home voicemail, her shield of ignorant bliss was shattered when she heard Dr. Honda's voice on the other side.

"Hello Ms. Izumi this is Dr. Honda calling. I ran your blood and urine samples quickly and I believe you should come back tomorrow first thing. I have an opening for nine o'clock and I hope you can make it. Thank you for your time." The voice message said.

Konata wanted to cry again as she sat on her bed and hugged herself tightly.

She didn't sleep at all that night. It was pure mental torture for her listening to the clock's tick, making her think that with each tick, it drew her closer to the unknown abyss. Konata didn't have the results of any tests yet but she was somehow convinced that her entire world was going to be turned upside-down after she left her appointment the next day.

Finding herself sitting in the same waiting room and ultimately the same exam room as the previous day, Konata breathed deeply. She wasn't scared at this point, just depressed and was trying to decide whether to convince herself of the worst so the doctor's words wouldn't hurt as much, or try to convince herself of the best so it would make her clean bill of health announcement that much better.

When Dr. Honda finally entered the exam room, Konata sat up straight and readied herself. The doctor sat down and opened her file and cleared his throat.

"Okay Ms. Izumi, this is what I have. I ran your samples yesterday and I also pulled the old medical file of your mother, Kanata." Dr. Honda said and hesitated before he continued. "Your mother passed away because of an

unknown genetic illness that resulted in her smaller stature and left her with a weak constitution. Ms. Izumi...I'm sorry I have to say this...but I have to diagnose you with your mother's illness."

Even though Konata tried to convince herself of bad news to soften the blow, it still crushed her. She slowly gasped and lifted her eyelids further showing the green in her frightened eyes.

"When your mother gave birth to you, she passed away shortly after because her body was too weak to recover from the physical strains of childbirth. The reason you have lived much longer than your mother is because you haven't birthed any children." Dr. Honda continued. "Your physical height was the first symptom that you inherited your mother's genetic disease and I stayed up all night last night rechecking all these results but they all came to the same conclusion. I'm sorry, Ms. Izumi...but you're going to die."

Konata's facial features remained unchanged and she continued to breathe as the doctor continued to explain her inevitable demise through a series of symptoms. Even the fact that there were drugs that would slow the progress, Konata could only vocalize one question.

"How long...?" She asked, trying to hold herself together inside.

Dr. Honda hesitated again, furthering Konata's inner dismay until he replied. "At the most...six months."

The death sentence only pounded itself in further for Konata as Dr. Honda continued to read his list of drugs he was going to prescribe the ill-fated woman to slow her death and to make her as comfortable as possible in her final months. As his words became an avalanche of inaudible white noise, only one simple thought came to Konata as the death sentence unleashed her inner child again.

I want my mommy.

When the horrible ordeal was over, Konata stepped out into the fresh air of Japan again and looked at everything around her. She saw birds flying in the sky, as well as planes higher up. She watched the traffic in the streets fly past her and the people walking on the sidewalks continue their lives as per usual. Konata didn't even exist to them, or her diagnosis of a disease that didn't even have a name or a known cause.

Why?

That was the single thought Konata asked herself as her tired legs carried her petite body towards her car and she slowly opened the door and sat, still absorbing everything. The world was moving at a normal pace as she watched from the parking lot, yet it was still moving too fast for her. It was too much for her.

Konata couldn't contain herself anymore and she couldn't run from the obvious. She was going to die in six months or less. She began to breathe harder and harder until her eyes flooded and tears rolled down her small cheeks. Covering her face, she cried loudly alone in her car, releasing the

emotions she had been keeping locked away from her friends and family for so long now. Konata wrapped her fingers in her blue hair above her head and pulled violently to send shockwaves of pain into her that would jolt her awake from this nightmare. When she realized she was fully awake and that everything in the doctor's office happened, she rested her head on her steering wheel and cried louder with only one name in mind.

Kagami.

CHAPTER 3

Kagami Hiiragi slowly awoke a little past one in the morning. She shifted her tired eyes around her dark room and felt her boyfriend toss slightly in his sleep and Kagami glanced at her nightstand. A new and expensive vase sat on it with a bouquet of flowers in it and it was addressed to her. Staring at the ensemble of colorful flowers, she remembered how they got there. After Shido stormed out of their apartment after making Kagami feel only two inches tall, he returned a few hours later not to teach her that lesson, but with the bundle for her. Shido reared his other side to Kagami, the one she fell in love with. He had the look of an innocent puppy in his eyes as he held the flowers for her and apologized for treating her so roughly.

If Shido had flown off the handle in the early stages of their relationship, Kagami would've ripped him apart and dropped him by the curb with the rest of the trash. She unfortunately didn't have the power to read minds. Everything Shido did in their relationship was a calculated move. In the beginning, he was the charmer and good guy so naturally it shocked Kagami deeply the first time he hit her. He was able to change attitudes in

the blink of an eye and after he would beat her, he would become so affectionate and apologetic and would turn the tables around on Kagami. He would blame her for his outbursts and it was always a convincing act so it made Kagami think that she truly was the cause of his irrational acts and irate behavior. Tonight was no exception when Kagami took him back.

She slowly sat up and her mouth felt dry. Fixing the loose strap on her silk nightgown over her shoulder again, Kagami crawled out of the bed and tiptoed to the kitchen for a glass of water. Filling a glass with the refreshing liquid, she quickly inhaled it all and stared out her kitchen window at the skyline of Tokyo. Staring at thousands of blinking lights in the distance couldn't help but pull a small smile on her mouth until it was suddenly disappeared.

"You're up late." Shido's chilling voice stated from behind.

Kagami's heart began to beat faster. She didn't turn to look at him; she simply replied, "Yes."

Hearing the man's footsteps approach her from behind made her more tense with each creaking of the floorboards until she felt his presence behind her. He slowly wrapped his arms around Kagami's flat stomach and gently pulled her towards him, setting his chin on top of her head and breathe in the sweet aroma of her shampoo.

"You know I love you very much, right?" Shido said with affection in his voice.

Kagami was reluctant to answer. She couldn't help but feel that every fiber in her being was telling her to turn around and slap him across the face and more. Something was telling her to verbally and physically fight this man and make him leave her home and life forever, with force if necessary. Yet the thought of turning and confronting him only filled her with fear.

"...I do..." Kagami replied meekly.

Shido grinned. "Do you think I like it when I'm forced to hurt you, Kagami?"

This was wrong. Did he just say that he was "forced" to do all those horrible things to Kagami? No man in their right mind would ever lay a hostile finger on a woman for any reason, yet Shido has physically hurt Kagami before and showed little to no remorse when he was doing it; only when he came back to perform his apology.

"But...but you do...hurt me...Koichi." Kagami replied, still nervous. "I don't like it. I don't want to keep covering and hiding all the marks you leave on me. If you love me...then why do you hit me...?"

Shido sighed. "I need to do these things because you're just not strong enough to be in the real world, Kagami. I'm trying to toughen you up so you'll be able to stand on your own two feet."

"I'm thirty-five years old, Koichi." Kagami replied, still standing with Shido's arms wrapped around her and she could feel his breath blow

through her hair. "I built a law firm on my own because I always believed in myself and I worked hard at it."

Shido could hear confidence in Kagami's voice whenever she spoke of her law firm. If he wanted to further his plans of taking over Kagami's firm, he had to extinguish the woman's confidence. "No, Kagami, you didn't. The people you surrounded yourself with did the work. You have only been sucking up all the glory and using your credentials as a lawyer to make yourself look better. Now Kagami, that's not fair to everyone around you. What would your family say if they knew this about you? What would your younger sister say about you mooching off the hard work after all that she has been through in her life and how hard she had to work? I would be ashamed of myself if I were you, Kagami Hiiragi. You should consider yourself lucky to have someone like me in your life that is able to look past all your personality issues and love you. If I were to leave you I guarantee you that there will never be anybody else on this Earth that will love you because of who you are on the inside. All I ever wanted to do was to help you in your career yet you continue to sabotage yourself and bring disgrace to our profession. Yesterday with Mr. Kawazu was a perfect example. You lost him as a client because deep down you know that you don't deserve to have your own firm and that you're not skilled to be in this career."

Shido was still trying to crawl inside Kagami's head. There was no other person in Kagami's firm that worked harder than she did yet every time Shido talked to her about business, she couldn't see her hard work anymore. She only saw herself standing alone in the dark while others around her worked to keep her firm alive. Kagami asked herself if Shido was right because despite all of his many shortcomings, one thing he did know was how people worked mentally and he was a borderline mind reader. It took a long time but Shido was on the verge of breaking down Kagami's confidence and spirit once and for all.

"I...I...I don't...I don't mean to..." Kagami's voice was growing frail and Shido knew he was about to corner her, deepening his sinister grin.

He patted her head gently and whispered, "Now, now, Kagami. There's no need to apologize for being selfish. We all have faults...yours just hurt people mentally and you're alone because of it. But don't worry...I'm here for you. I'll always be here for you."

Kagami's eyes trembled and she felt grounded again. "Please...please help me change, Koichi. Don't give up on me."

He had her now. "I'll never let that happen, Kagami. I love you and I won't let you keep destroying yourself or your firm...but you need to help me help you."

Kagami nodded and suddenly turned to him and looked at Shido. "Please teach me how to change."

Shido moved his hand from the top of her head and slowly slid it down to her cheek. "We'll work hard on it tomorrow when we try and rebuild our firm. But for now let's go back to bed."

Kagami nodded and puckered her lips and closed her eyes, expecting to be kissed by him. Instead, Shido moved his hand from her cheek and navigated it to the side of her head and quickly grabbed a handful of hair and pulled. Pulling her like a dog on a leash, he dragged Kagami by her long hair towards the bedroom as she struggled and yelped in pain while following

her lover and gripped his hand but her weak grip couldn't free herself. Before she could vocalize her pain and discomfort into words, Shido did it for her.

"Remember, Kagami. Everything I do to you is for your benefit. We have a long way to go to make you even just a little bit better." He said, still smiling to himself.

Kagami continued to grip her hair in pain as she grunted in the agony as she stumbled behind Shido, still fearful of this man. In the midst of her discomfort, she didn't even recognize the fact that Shido referred to her law firm as "our firm," as if he had some stake in what Kagami built.

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Usually when someone has a bad day, they're able to sleep it off and wake up the next day refreshed and feeling much better about themselves and the day ahead. If only that could've been true for Konata as she stood in line at her pharmacy. She was given a dozen prescriptions by her doctor yesterday to slow her gradual demise into the grave and she felt so utterly helpless when she dropped them off. She was able to stop crying momentarily in the public arena to pick them up the next day but she felt exhausted. All she could do yesterday was lie in bed and ask why she was cursed with this death sentence.

"Next?" A pharmacist's voice announced and Konata lifted her head up and walked forward.

"Pickups for Konata Izumi." The ailing blue-haired woman said.

The pharmacist typed her name into the computer and when her results came back, the pharmacist tried to remain calm at what this woman was picking up. The female pharmacist gulped and retreated to the backroom to find the appropriate drugs as Konata waited patiently.

Suddenly, she felt her throat tighten and knew a cough was coming, prompting her to pull out a handkerchief and she began coughing into it. She suddenly tasted iron. Withdrawing the cloth from her mouth, her heart sped up again and watery pressure in her eyes mounted when she saw many red stains in the handkerchief. Hearing the pharmacist return, Konata quickly stashed the cloth into her pocket and when she saw the pharmacist carrying a large bag, she sighed.

The pharmacist began to lift prescription bottles out, one right after another and with each bottle that came out of the large bag, Konata felt herself sinking further into defeat. By the time all the prescriptions were out, a dozen brown bottles with white labels wrapped around them sat in front of the short woman and it only scrunched her face further.

An awkward silence fell between Konata and the pharmacist until the pharmacist cleared her throat and asked, "Do...do you need any instructions on which to take first?"

Konata shook her head slowly. "No thank you; I've got it covered."

The pharmacist collected the bottles again and put them in a large bag and allowed Konata to finish the transaction and leave the building. Carrying a bag as nearly as big as she was, Konata walked to the parking lot and couldn't help but turn her head one final time to see the pharmacist through the large glass windows on the clear day. It angered Konata to see the pharmacist take a tissue to wipe away a tear.

What the hell is she upset about? I'm the one who is going to die.

The blue-haired woman's thoughts began to grow more hostile; a natural transformation in any dying person. Now that she knew that there was a ticking clock on her life, Konata saw what other people who shared a similar fate saw. Everyone can say they sympathize or they know how they feel but in the end it was all a crock. How could anyone know how someone who is dying feels? The fact that people tried to connect with something they had no ability to comprehend felt like it was more of an insult.

When Konata returned home, she read the instructions for her first prescription. Opening the bottle and taking out a large red oblong pill, she swallowed it and downed a bottle of water and looked at her watch.

"Now I can't eat anything for four hours." Konata snarled.

The blue-haired woman sat alone in her kitchen and glanced at the twelve bottles sitting in a row. This was happening too fast. In just one week, Konata Izumi went from her vibrant and enthusiastic self, to feeling slightly under the weather, to coughing up blood, to seeing a doctor, and finally

receiving a death sentence. Despite the bad news, it gave Konata a new outlook on life.

The clamoring of her cell phone grabbed her attention and she reached for it and saw it was her cousin, Yutaka Kobayakawa. Konata was reluctant to answer it as she wasn't in the mood to talk to anybody but maybe talking to her would help. After all, Yutaka had the ability to bring light into even the darkest trench.

"Hello there, Yutaka." Konata said, trying to sound cheerful.

"Hey, Konata! I hope I didn't call at a bad time." Yutaka's voice replied over the phone.

Konata looked around her empty apartment. "Well I'm in the middle of a new manga story but I could use a break. So what's going on?"

"Our flight got delayed in Berlin so we're just sitting waiting for the next plane. There's a huge snowstorm here! I've never seen so much snow before!" Yutaka exclaimed innocently despite her older maturity.

Konata smiled weakly. "That's amazing, Yutaka. Is Tsukasa around?"

"Yes but she's on her phone right now with her publisher back in Tokyo. Her publisher is trying to setup a date for her to come back to Japan and do

a book signing and make a public appearance at a children's hospital." Yutaka replied. "We've been really busy lately and I've been feeling a little homesick recently but hopefully we'll be able to come back to Japan soon. If we do make sure you come and see us!"

Konata slowly nodded. "I will."

"So what's new with you, Konata? What's your new manga about?" Yutaka asked.

Konata searched her mind and made up a story for her cousin. "It's...it's about a girl who is dying and is trying to live life to the fullest before her time comes."

Yutaka was silent at first. "Oh...well...that's a little...different. What about all your stories about robots or aliens or the supernatural? Are you going in another direction?"

"Let's just call this a trial." Konata sighed to herself.

"Oh, okay. It sounds sad though and you know I don't like sad endings." Yutaka replied.

Neither do I.

"Yeah I know...but who knows. Maybe there'll be a surprise happy ending." Konata tried to fool herself into a false reality.

"I hope so! Anyway our new flight is boarding now so I'll call you again soon, Konata!" Yutaka exclaimed.

"Talk to you soon...Yu-chan." Konata whispered and quickly closed her cell phone.

From where she sat in Berlin Brandenburg Airport, Yutaka could've sworn she heard her cousin call her "Yu-chan." That was a nickname no one had called her since she graduated high school and she couldn't help but feel confused by her cousin's sudden touch of sentiment.

Talking to Yutaka did little to help lift Konata's spirits as she continued to sit in her isolated darkness. It seemed that nothing was going to lift Konata out of this hurdle as it was most likely going to be not only the last one she would ever have to face, but it would also be the one responsible for ending her life. Konata continued to sit motionless in her kitchen and haunted by the deafening quiet in her apartment and truly felt alone. She didn't want to tell Yutaka about her disease, especially when she was tens of thousands of miles away and it would only stress her unnecessarily. She also knew that if she told Yutaka, she would inevitably seek comfort and tell Tsukasa, who everybody knew couldn't keep a secret to save her life, especially one of this magnitude.

As she sat and stared aimlessly at the dozen pill bottles in front of her, Konata felt more depressed when she truly realized she had nobody to talk to. She wanted to vent in the worst possible way, but at the same time didn't want anybody to look at her differently. She couldn't talk to her other cousin, Yui about this either. And what would this do to her father? Konata was his pride and joy and only living memory of Kanata and now she was going to soon leave him behind.

Konata's mind suddenly popped another name into her head. As soon as she thought of the name, her heart once again began to race, her palms began to sweat, and her breathing became shallow as she quivered. The lonely woman picked up her phone and once again scrolled down her contact list and selected the name. What did she have to lose at this point? She pressed the "call" button and held the phone to her ear and waited for her old friend, Kagami Hiiragi, to pick up.

In Tokyo, Kagami sat in her office writing her reports for another client regarding a lawsuit as Shido worked beside her. There was an uncomfortable silence between them as the sound of pens scribbling against paper was the only sense of bonding between them. The humming of Kagami's vibrating cell phone broke the silence and it grabbed her attention, prompting her to open her desk drawer and grab her cell phone.

When she held it up to her face and saw who was calling, her heart skipped a beat. To think she was only thinking about this certain blue-haired woman the other night and she glanced at Shido, who was still working, and back at her phone. She stood from her desk and as she began to walk out of her office, Shido made his annoyance to the situation known.

"Make it quick. We've got a board meeting in half an hour." He snapped, not looking up from his paperwork.

"Yes, dear." She quickly replied and scurried out of the office, past the working Ayano Minegishi and into the hallway and quickly opened her phone. "Hello...? Konata...?"

As if it was a sign from above, Konata's dreary persona was washed away and her spirit brightened when she heard Kagami's voice. "Long time no speak, Kagamin!"

"It's great to hear from you! How have you been?" Kagami quickly asked, her happiness growing for the first time in a long time.

Able to completely disregard the growing problem inside her, Konata's enthusiasm continued to glow. "Oh, you know, busy, busy, busy. I had dinner with Hiyorin and her husband the other night to keep up our focus on work so it has been really hectic lately. What have you been doing? How's your work going?"

Kagami hesitated, gulped, and continued. "It's going well. My...partner... and I have been working really hard together and this job keeps us guessing all the time."

Konata gulped. "Well then...maybe sometime if you weren't too busy... maybe we could meet for dinner or something."

Hearing the invitation sent Kagami's emotions ablaze as there was nothing she wanted more than to see her old friend again. Before she could respond however, she heard the sound of someone snapping their fingers and she turned to see Shido standing down the hall with a glare on his face. He signaled with a flick of his head to follow him and he walked back to the office.

Kagami felt a chill down her spine and gulped as she replied to Konata. "I...uh...I'll have to get back to you on that."

Konata wasn't expecting such a quick and cold response. They were off to a great start but as soon as Konata mentioned seeing each other, it quickly turned. She thought it was something she said.

"Um...okay...I guess." Konata replied. "I hope I'm not keeping you from anything."

Knowing her time to return to her boyfriend was running short, Kagami became nervous as the conversation began to drag on. "Uh, listen Konata, I have a lot on my plate right now so could I call you back?"

The blue-haired woman couldn't help but feel hurt by this. "Um...sure...I guess."

"Okay thanks, bye!" Kagami quickly said and closed her cell phone and like the dog she thought she was, she quickly ran back to her master.

Hearing the click and following dial tone from her phone, Konata's heart sank and she slowly lowered her phone from her ear. Tears filled her eyes again as she looked down and whispered, "Just can't catch a break..."

As Kagami quickly returned to her office, her secretary Ayano stood and halted her. "Why are you with that jerk, Kagami? You know he doesn't deserve you."

Kagami shook her head. "You don't understand, Ayano. It's me that doesn't deserve him. I need him. We all need him here."

Before Ayano could reply, Kagami entered her office where Shido stood with two glasses of fizzling water in his hands. "Drink up, Kagami. The associate board members are entering the conference room now so this'll help calm your nerves."

Kagami took the glass. "What's in it?"

"Alka Seltzer." He replied. "I know you've been having your fair share of headaches too so this will help you perform like the professional I know you are inside."

Kagami smiled and took the glass. Drinking it with her fellow lawyer and lover, the two finished their drinks, gathered their files, and began to walk towards the conference room where they would meet fellow lawyers. This meeting was to address the recent concerns Kagami's fellow lawyers in her firm were having with her regarding her performance the other day in blowing the Kawazu deal. She owned the firm, but she still had fellow lawyers working for her and some began to notice that she had been acting strange recently, making some question her legal competency.

The two arrived at the conference room where six other lawyers sat around a large table and they eyed their female boss as she walked in with Shido. Shido took a seat and allowed Kagami to sit at the head of room and stand above them as she opened her files, cleared her throat, and began.

"Gentlemen, as you know we had a bit of a problem the other day. We were unable to secure Mr. Kawazu's trust and create an environment where he felt confident to trust us and we lost his business because of it." Kagami stated with confidence. "Rest assure that we will spare no expense in getting him back and we will continue to work on finding—"

Kagami suddenly stopped when she felt her stomach churn and begin to heat up. She lowered her hands to it and begin to hold it in growing discomfort as something was brewing inside and she began to sweat.

"Um...are you okay Hiiragi-san?" One of the lawyers asked.

Kagami quickly looked back up. "Ye...yes. Yes I'm fine. As I was saying, we're going to work even harder than before so make sure—"

Kagami couldn't ignore it this time. Something was wrong with her and she began to feel very sick to her stomach. She quickly excused herself and ran as fast as she could to the nearest restroom and it wasn't a moment too soon as she began to vomit relentlessly and wince in the searing pain.

The lawyers exchanged looks with each other in confusion and further concern regarding Kagami's mental state until Shido stepped up, happily satisfied with what he did to Kagami. Putting Alka Seltzer in his drink to make Kagami less suspicious was a genius move while he spiked hers with ipecac. "Excuse me, may I have your attention please?"

All eyes turned to him.

"I would like to apologize for Kagami. She hasn't been altogether recently and I believe that all the pressure of the job is beginning to get to her." Shido announced with more glowing confidence and professionalism. "I however do have a few proposals with me that I believe would be of great value to this firm...if this board allows me to proceed."

The six lawyers exchanged looks with each other and allowed Shido to proceed. He smiled and began to vocalize his ideas for the firm as he continued to put his sinister plot into action to push Kagami out of a job and into the streets.

CHAPTER 4

I don't like this...I don't like this at all...! This can't be happening...!
Someone help me...! Save me...!

Konata's personal thoughts were becoming angrier as she sat next to her toilet on the cold tile floor of her bathroom and trembled uncontrollably while her body burned like a furnace, producing large quantities of sweat. The symptoms in her disease were getting worse and Dr. Honda warned her about this. This was only the beginning of the physical pain she was going to feel and the worst—according to Konata—was about to happen. She ran her hand across her head to wipe the sweat away and it instantly became entangled in her long, messy blue hair. As she moved her hand downward, she saw countless blue follicles wrapped around it, marking the start of her hair's demise.

It kept getting worse for the female otaku. The tears in her eyes once again returned as her trembling increased. She felt so alone and scared yet felt torn about it. She didn't want to be alone, but she didn't want to tell anybody about this because she didn't want anybody to make a big deal over it. More than that, she didn't want to hurt anybody and didn't want to be around for the tears.

What only added more pain to her psyche was Kagami's early dismissal of her. The ailing woman thought that her old friend would've been more enthusiastic about hearing from her, yet she completely disregarded her existence when Konata brought up the idea of getting together to catch up. Because of her non-mainstream interests in the otaku culture, Konata never had any true friends until she met Kagami and Tsukasa back in the day and when they went their separate ways, it hurt Konata a lot initially.

Konata suddenly remembered that one summer night in June the last time she saw Tsukasa before she admitted herself to the psychological program after she was raped. Konata cried to herself the whole way home because without her, she felt so insecure even with Kagami around. It was when Tsukasa was gone that Konata felt that she connected with Kagami more at a deeper level because the two needed each other in that way. They became even closer; almost like sisters, though Konata thought they were becoming deeper than that and it began to make her feel confused about herself. She had always teased Kagami about having feelings for her, but she never thought it would come to fruition. Though Konata had no proof, she believed Kagami felt the same way and that was one of the reasons why Kagami was so dismissive of her over the phone, but Konata was still oblivious to Kagami and Shido's relationship behind closed doors.

Struggling to get to her feet, Konata limped to her kitchen and broke another prescription bottle open and spilled the white narcotic tablets all over her counter. She quickly swallowed one and began to drink more water as her breathing deepened with her shortness of breath. Looking around her apartment, she was still alone and the ticking clock was her only companion. With each tick, the rage mounted. Her blood boiled, her anger rose, her grip on the bottle tightened. One tick, two clicks, three clicks—one second less on Earth, two seconds less on Earth, three seconds less on Earth.

She finally snapped. She screamed loudly and ran to the large circular clock in her living room, ripped it off the wall, and hurled it with all her might across her living room. The large clock shattered and threw glass everywhere as Konata felt her knees turn to putty and she collapsed to the floor and let it all out. Up until now she was holding it in but when she saw several more threads of her blue hair fall from her head, she allowed herself to cry loudly and curl into a ball.

"Yui-nee-san! I'm so happy you're here!" Four-year-old Konata Izumi exclaimed. "Will you play with me?! All Yu-chan wants to do is sleep all day!"

Yui smiled and picked up Konata and walked into the house with her. "Well she is a sickly girl, you know. She does need her rest but yeah we'll play!"

Konata was bouncing with excitement in her big cousin's arms as Yui turned the corner and saw Sojiro Izumi holding her sleeping baby sister, Yutaka, and rocking her gently. The red-headed baby was out like a light and Yui was touched by the sight. It helped ease the burden that she was playing the role of housewife for her uncle and only daughter after her aunt's departure from this world.

As Yui sat down with Konata, she couldn't help but notice a strange look in Sojiro's eyes as he held the sleeping Yutaka. It was one of both nostalgia and distress. She knew what this was and she slowly sighed to herself and sat Konata down, allowing her to stand on her own feet.

Still innocent to the tragedies around her, the young Konata ambitiously asked, "So what are we going to play first, Yui-nee-san?! I'm getting really good at this new racing game and—"

"I'll tell you what, Kona-chan. Let me talk to your daddy first and then we'll play." Yui said firmly but lovingly. "Hey, why don't you go have a look in my schoolbag? I think I have something in there that I think you'll like."

Konata's eyes lit up like fire and she quickly dashed to the bag screaming, "Choco-cornets! Choco-cornets!"

Yui smiled to herself at Konata's innocence and turned back to Sojiro, who was holding her baby sister out to her as she became restless in her slumber. Yui took her sleeping sister and held her.

"Tell me, uncle, are you feeling any better today?" Yui asked with concern and she could see he was fighting the urge to cry.

He slowly nodded and looked at his niece. "I think so...but I still wonder if I'm going to be able to do this. To be a good father without Kanata by my side."

Yui nodded. "I know you had some...issues...when she died, but I can see it in your eyes. You love Konata more than anything and you would move Mount Fuji by hand if you had to if it would make her smile."

Sojiro nodded. "I'm sorry to put these burdens on you, Yui, but I'm still not altogether. I cannot even begin to express my gratitude that you're here and that you're helping me take care of Konata while I also help with your sister."

Yui formed a small smile. "You're welcome, uncle. What else can I do?"

Sojiro paused until he replied. "Just...just be here...for us. Promise me you'll never leave us and always visit us whenever you can and when you visit, always show the side of you that we all love. Always be happy and flamboyant whenever you come through the door. Konata seems to really like that."

Yui's smile deepened. "Well I know I can do that...but I can't help but feel that there's something else you're not telling me, uncle."

Sojiro slowly nodded. "There is. It's about...how Kanata died."

Yui perked her ears up and scooted closer.

"The doctors couldn't find out what was wrong with her after Konata was born. Her body just...shut down...and the things she had to feel and what she had to go through before she died...it was so horrible." Sojiro whispered, still fighting the tears. "The worst part is that they believed that Kanata's condition was genetic and that it might one day be passed onto Konata. Even if she never has children of her own...she could still have it."

Yui grabbed her ailing uncle's hands and held them. "Don't think about such things. Konata is here, she's healthy, and best of all...she's happy. You don't have to worry about anything on my part because I'll always stick close with Konata, no matter what she needs, even if it's just a friend to play games or read manga with. You just keep doing what you're doing, uncle. Konata loves you and you shouldn't have any regrets."

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The intense burning of her head awoke Konata from her slumber and her sleepy eyes looked around her desolate apartment. It was very bright with the setting sun shining through her window and she could tell it was early evening fell asleep and she turned her head to look at her ticking clock, only to see a vacant spot sitting in its place and she looked to the other side of her living room and saw its shattered remains on the floor. She sighed and rolled her sleeve up to see her watch, seeing it read five o'clock in the evening.

Feeling her muscles ache inside of her as she moved, Konata pulled herself up and sat upright, still hugging the pillow to her chest. She remembered the dream she had and knew she couldn't keep doing this to herself. She had to tell the people she loved that she was going to die.

Gathering herself together, Konata changed clothes and slipped a hat over her head to hide her depleting hair and quickly left her apartment. The orange evening sun brightened her bleaching skin while she walked, coughing a bit as she went. She didn't know who she wanted to tell first but as soon as she left her apartment, her burning body turned cold again and she quickly felt the desire for a cup of coffee.

She took a seat at an outdoor café and waited for the waitress to bring her a menu. When she did, Konata quickly stated, "I'll have a latte, please."

Konata watched the waitress walk away and she remembered the days she served her customers at the cosplay café she worked at all those years ago.

She wondered what had become of it or even if it was still in business. She also remembered Patricia Martin...and what she did to the Hiiragi family's shrine and when the two stopped being friends. It still hurt Konata everyday that Patty did what she did and that Konata was forced to make the measures she did for the Hiiragi family. For Tsukasa...but also for Kagami.

Konata remembered when she visited Kagami after the oldest Hiiragi twin butchered her hair in her crumbling mental state. That was the very first time Konata realized she had deep intimate feelings for Kagami. The moment when Konata wrapped her arms around Kagami's crying head and held it her close and followed it up with a tender kiss replayed in her mind over and over again. The time before Kagami was stabbed also flashed into her mind when Konata met her in their restaurant to discuss Patty's attack on the Hiiragi family and Konata nearly suffered a breakdown herself. When Kagami said she was dropping out of school and kissed her goodbye, Konata felt as if her heart was ripped out and stomped into the floor.

I'm...I'm so confused. I never dated a man...but I'm straight...aren't I...? I never had feelings for anybody except her. I thought I loved Kagami like a sister...but why do I think about her more than anyone else? Why do I fantasize about kissing her...? Why do I write poetry about us becoming more than just friends...? I mean...I love Kagami but I'm not in love with her.

Konata continued to think about these things until the waitress returned with her steaming latte. The blue-haired woman sipped the hot liquid and felt her body warming up again but wondered how much longer it would be until her fever would return and when she would have to take her next round of drugs to quell the symptoms.

Should I tell Yui-nee-san first...or should I just tell dad first? I don't know what he'll do, though. I want someone with me when I tell him.

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For the first time since this morning, Kagami's stomach was finally settled after her spew earlier in the morning. She was still oblivious to the fact that Shido spiked her water with ipecac that triggered her stomach to reject everything in it, thus letting him steal the spotlight for the day and make himself known in her law firm. Unfortunately, Kagami was still oblivious to Shido's insidious plans to kick her to the curb when he was done with her.

She had a craving for a latte with whipped cream and made her way to a certain outdoor café she always liked going to when things became too stressful at the office. Parking her car outside, she took a seat at the outdoor café but didn't notice that she was back-to-back with a short, blue-haired woman who was deep in thought.

"May I help you, miss?" The waitress asked.

"I'll have a latte with whipped cream and chocolate syrup, please." Kagami stated as the waitress wrote it down.

The blue-haired woman behind her so was deep in thought she didn't even notice or even hear Kagami's voice.

Konata finished her drink and dropped the money plus the tip on the table and slowly sat up, feeling her bones creak and crack with each movement. Readjusting her hat, Konata didn't even turn to see the woman sitting behind her as she slowly began to walk again towards the train station to see her father. As Konata began to walk further away from the oblivious Kagami's backside, two young boys suddenly approached Konata, each one holding a manga book and a black magic marker.

"Um...excuse me...are you Konata Izumi?" One of them asked nervously.

The sickly woman turned to the boys and saw a copy of one of her manga books in their hands and they were looking at her with looks of admiration. Despite her collapsing health and the crushing weight on her mentality, Konata smiled, knowing where this was going.

"Why...yes I am." She said slyly with her cat-like grin.

The two boys were barely able to contain their excitement as one of them held up his manga book and with a trembling voice asked, "Could...could we have your autograph, Izumi-senpai?"

Konata giggled to herself upon seeing the boys' exuberant looks and she took one of their books and the magic marker. She subtly yet politely agreed to give them both autographs as this was one of the most rewarding parts of her job as a storywriter. Most artists would charge extra for autographs but Konata didn't believe in that; all that mattered to her was that she was spreading the otaku culture. When she finished giving the two boys her autograph, they happily began to back away.

"Thank you Izumi-senpai!" One of them exclaimed.

Izumi.

The name perked up Kagami's ears as the waitress returned with her drink. The long-haired lawyer slowly turned and saw a short woman waving goodbye to two younger boys and when she saw her turn her face, Kagami's heart nearly slammed through her ribcage. Konata. There she stood as plain as the day they basked in.

Kagami didn't know what to do as she watched her old friend turn and begin to walk away from her. Her heart pounding and her mouth as dry as cotton, Kagami stuttered and grunted, trying to force Konata's name out of her mouth. With each step away from Kagami, the long-haired lawyer felt she was becoming weaker and weaker until she snapped.

Kagami shot up and knocked over the table in front of her, spilling her drink all over the ground and screamed "Konata!"

The short woman froze like a statue and quickly turned. The two looked each other in the eyes and it seemed the world suddenly stood still. Luckily for them, the café was all-but deserted and the two women began to slowly walk towards each other, each one with a look of pure shock cemented onto their faces. As they got closer to each other, the two women suddenly ran as fast as they could and when they collided, the two hugged each tightly and didn't say a word. It was then that they knew that they shared a very special bond.

Two years since they last saw each other in New York City had passed and they had so much to say, yet this hug served them just fine for now.

CHAPTER 5

So much to say to each other, yet no words to express them in. It didn't matter to them though that they were speechless as they stared blankly at each other at the outdoor café. They were absolutely content with simply staring at each other for as long as they wanted; pasting each other's images into their minds so they could keep them fresh in their memories. Kagami and Konata continued to gaze at each other for nearly fifteen minutes without saying a single word until it was the blue-haired woman who finally broke the silence.

"It's really great to see you again, Kagami." Konata cleared her throat and verbalized her first thoughts.

Kagami ran a hand through her hair while smiling. "It's great to see you too, Konata. I've missed you a lot these past two years."

Konata nodded, her smile still cemented onto her face. "I've been thinking about you a lot recently and I've wanted to get into contact with you again. Now that I have you here, please tell me, how's the law industry treating you?"

Kagami sighed. "The law isn't an industry, Konata. It's an academic field of practice and...you're just screwing with me, aren't you?"

The infamous cat-like grin returned to Konata's face and she giggled. "Can't slip anything past you...Kagamin!"

Kagami couldn't help but smile and sigh happily. "I haven't been called that in years. But if you're serious about that question, it's going pretty well actually. I'm still running my firm, got a great team working for me, I've been seeing a man for a few months, I've also—"

"Sorry to cut you off but I heard you had a boyfriend. How's that going?" Konata asked.

"Well, his name is Koichi Shido and he's a very...intelligent man." Kagami hesitated before finishing her sentence.

Konata picked up on that instantly. Just like her business partner, Konata had an eye for details and she said, "Is he a great guy? It seemed like you hesitated there."

Hearing the retort flustered Kagami and her eyes bounced back and forth like ping-pong balls in her head as she stuttered initially. "He is a good person, yes. We've had our rough spots along the way but show me a couple that hasn't."

Konata sounded a curious hum and wanted to see how Kagami would react with another conversation. "Yes, you do have a point there. Anyway, how's your family doing back in Saitama?"

Seeing Kagami become more relaxed and open about this particular question told Konata that her suspicions were warranted and it told her that her long-haired friend was hiding something about the relationship. Regardless, Konata continued to listen deeply as Kagami came further out of her shell after the seemingly endless stares before.

"They're doing great. My parents are still happily married, Inori is still married and taking care of her son, and Matsu is still working the shrine." Kagami replied and took a sip of her replacement beverage. "I'm still surprised that she still hasn't shown any interest in dating or seeking marriage with a respectable man but ever since that whole...you know...with Tsukasa...she became a much different person."

Konata nodded in agreement but a thought suddenly struck her when Kagami mentioned their history during that horrible ordeal. "Kagami, remember that night in June when we all went walking...and I stayed out to say goodbye to Tsukasa?"

It was clear that despite the fact nearly two decades had passed since that tragic New Year's Eve, Kagami was still uncomfortable talking about it. Nevertheless, she nodded.

"Well, I remember how close you and I became after that. I remember that we spent nearly the entire time together and when we were able to graduate high school together...that was the happiest day of my life thus far." Konata began to truly open up, slightly confusing Kagami. "And when we went our separate ways for college and even when our careers took us to different parts of the globe, I never forgot about the days we shared, Kagami. I also need to confess something to you."

Kagami was a little worried about where this was going. Regardless, her curiosity got the better of her and she said, "Go ahead."

"Remember the last time we saw each other in America when you came and visited Hiyorin and I at the anime convention?" Konata asked and her eyes glanced away.

It was a memorable event and Kagami remembered that day. The day she had her own family reunion in New York City filled the strong tsundere with immense joy but that wasn't what she remembered the most. The memory that stuck with her the most was when she arrived at that convention and saw Konata sitting at her booth selling and autographing manga books. Her heart was pounding in her chest while her palms moistened, as if her body was trying to tell her something. The nerves she was feeling that day were extraordinary as well. She wasn't nervous seeing her sisters or parents and she wasn't even stressed about the long trip between Japan and the United States. However, when she saw Konata, she became a shaky, nervous mess.

"I do." Kagami simply replied while weighing the memories in her mind.

Konata cleared her throat. "When I turned and looked up and saw you for the first time...I wanted to scream and hug you as tight as I could. I was so happy you came to see me, Kagami."

Kagami tilted her head. "Then why didn't you jump up and hug me?"

Konata clenched her body and Kagami wondered if she was about to venture into uncharted territories. The blue-haired woman cleared her throat and looked into Kagami's eyes. "If I hugged you...I never would've been able to let go. It took so much energy to remain as calm as I did and the only thing I could think of to do to keep myself calm was to resort to my old ways and make fun of you."

Hearing this revelation began to speedup Kagami's heart and she began to tremble. She waited until Konata averted her eyes until she allowed herself to gulp so she wouldn't see the movement in her throat. This was becoming too real for her and Kagami didn't like where this conversation was going. Was Konata trying to confess something deeper for her? If this was true, Kagami was torn down the middle. All her life she was raised on the notion that love can only exist between a man and a woman and that everything else was illegitimate, which was what triggered her to pursue a relationship with a man, hoping that her thoughts of Konata would eventually be erased. It was this lapse in judgment that allowed Kagami to trap herself with a snake in the grass like Shido; she sought the relationship because she thought she was obligated to by society. Despite this, why did her relationship with not only Shido, but the idea of any man feel so wrong? Kagami was now scared and confused.

An unsettling silence fell between the two women and they stared at each other again. This time it was different though and it was completely

awkward. The first time around it felt like each woman was staring at a work of art, lost in a surreal atmosphere of admiration and awe for the other. This time though, it was scary and disturbing.

The silence was shattered when Konata's petite body clenched again and she began coughing. The coughing was loud and intense, making Kagami look at her with concern as Konata placed a white napkin over her mouth and coughed into it. When her coughing ceased, Konata made a rather unusual move. Instead of placing the crumbled napkin on the table, she quickly stuffed it into her pocket and out of public sight.

"Are...are you okay?" Kagami asked, hardly noticing Konata's attempt at hiding the used cloth.

Konata nodded and tried to initiate a smokescreen attempt to mask her declining health. This was the first time she had seen Kagami in years and she didn't want to waste it confessing she was dying. "I'm...I'm just...I'm just recovering from a cold. Don't worry, I'm fine."

If this was any other meeting or conversation, Kagami would've been more suspicious and pried into Konata's mind to find the truth. This conversation between the two women however was far from mainstream and it clouded her vision to the fact that something was seriously wrong with Konata. Kagami took her friend's word for her recovering health and moved on.

"Anyway, I was very happy to see you too again back then Konata. But I can't help but get the feeling that there's something...deeper...that you want

to ask me. Is there?" Kagami asked as she crossed her legs to try and stop them from shaking.

Could this be the moment of truth? Konata had so much she wanted to tell Kagami, yet she was so afraid of what her reaction would be in either case. Konata slowly nodded and stared at Kagami again.

Clearing her throat again, she slowly whispered, "Kagami...have you ever wanted to ask someone you care deeply about a question so much...but your heart was almost too terrified of what the answer might be?"

The relatively trivial question triggered Kagami to clench again and gulp again, this time Konata spotted the large lump in her throat. As soon as Konata asked the question, time suddenly froze for the two women and their endless stares continued. If they listened closely, they could probably hear each other's heartbeats sounding like drums underneath their skin.

Kagami could see this silence wasn't going to end unless she did something. Konata was desperate for her to answer. Her trembling blue eyes practically screamed it as Kagami slowly said with a nervous voice, "Um... sometimes...friends shouldn't ask...those kinds...of questions. Sometimes...things are best left unsaid and unexplored. If we never venture into that...area...then none of us will ever take the chance of being hurt. If we're hurt in...that way...that could ruin a great friendship, Konata. I don't think either one of us wants that."

Konata seemed to have hiccupped when Kagami said this. Kagami didn't know it, but Konata was trying to swallow the lump that would trigger a

crying episode. The blue-haired woman tried desperately to hold it all in and she quickly nodded and put on another acting episode like at Hiyori's dinner to mask her despair.

Rolling up her sleeve, Konata looked at her watch. "Wow is that what time it is?! I can't believe you, Kagamin. Keeping me from my work like that! Now the whole otaku culture will suffer because of you! Those two boys from earlier might be scarred for life now!"

Kagami rolled her eyes. "Wow, drama much?! Anyway, I should be going too. Koichi is probably getting worried about me since I haven't called."

The two women stood from their chairs and hugged each other one final time.

"It was really great seeing you again, Kagami." Konata said with a smile. "I hope we can do this again, soon."

Kagami was surprised at first but replied with a smile. "You have my number obviously."

Konata nodded happily. "And you have mine, right?!"

The female lawyer nodded and embraced her short friend one more time until they went their separate ways. It wasn't a moment too soon. As soon as

Kagami was far enough from Konata, the blue-haired woman quickly ducked into a back alley between two buildings and vomited relentlessly behind a few trashcans, some large spots of blood in the spew. Konata was holding that one in for a long time and her tremors quickly returned as she rested her decaying body against the brick wall and breathed deeply. More sweat trickled down her head as a few more threads of her blue hair left her head while she felt the fever begin to return.

Kagami drove home and tried to calm herself. That last hug from Konata sent her heart into hyper-drive as she breathed deeply and gripped the steering wheel of her car tightly.

Why do I feel this way...? I...I'm not in love with Konata. It...it was just excitement. I hadn't seen her in so long so I was just excited. Yeah, that's it, yeah. Besides...I have a boyfriend who loves me. I just have to keep telling myself these things. Konata is just a friend and Koichi is the one who loves me and I love him. Besides...what would the firm and the associate attorneys say if they found out I had these...desires...?

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It was dark when Kagami finally arrived back at her apartment. When she unlocked the front door and slowly entered, she was surprised to see that the entire apartment was dark as well. What also surprised her was that Shido didn't call her once to see where she was and when she called his phone, she only got his voicemail. Thinking he was asleep, Kagami tried to remain as quiet as possible as she closed the door behind her and locked it again. Kagami smiled to herself as her unplanned outing with Konata went smoothly despite the fear she felt when things became real in terms of their deeper relationship.

Her smile was short-lived. In the midst of the darkness, an unknown leather strap suddenly wrapped itself around her neck and squeezed with angry vigor. Kagami's scream was silenced by her cutoff air supply and she dropped her keys and tried to loosen the constricting grip around her neck as she tripped and fell to the hardwood floor of her apartment. It didn't take long for Kagami to figure out a belt was wrapping itself tighter around her neck as her fingers couldn't dig themselves between the belt and her neck to free herself.

The lights above her suddenly came on and she looked into the violent face of Koichi Shido, his belt acting like a noose as he held the other end of it and he quickly pulled her up, forcing Kagami to climb to her knees as she continued to cry and gasp for air in her fright.

"Where the hell have you been, Kagami?!" He yelled in her face.

Kagami tried to answer him but her lack of oxygen hindered this. She continued to struggle to free herself as her tears mounted and her face began to turn violet while she struggled. Shido, holding Kagami up like an animal with one hand, used his free hand to slap her across the face to strike more fear and pain into her.

"Answer me you little bitch! Where were you?! You didn't call, you didn't text, nothing! You were cheating on me, weren't you?!" Shido yelled again and hoisted her up higher; depriving her of the little oxygen she had left.

Kagami shook her head as violently as she could as tears ran down her cheeks and the grunts and chokes escaping her mouth were the only verbal pleas for her life she could make. Shido still showed no mercy. Still seeing her as a dog on a leash, he dragged her through the apartment as she continued to thrash and kick in futile attempts to free herself, her body mopping the floor as she was tugged along. Her flailing legs knocked over chairs and decorations in the apartment until Shido dragged her into the bedroom and still using the belt as his tool of control, dragged the frightened woman onto the bed.

When she was on top of it, he released her from the tightening grip of death and Kagami coughed and inhaled as fast and deep as she could. Her tears flowed and her body trembled as fresh marks formed around her neck. Sitting on her hands and knees while gripping her burning throat, Kagami slowly turned her head and looked at the man she saw as her lover and protector, only to see him with the same burning look of anger on his face as he tossed the belt aside.

"...Why...?" Kagami wheezed, her voice crackling and raspy from the vicious attack.

"You're my woman, Kagami. That means you're my property. Everything about you belongs to me so you should consider yourself grateful." Shido snapped. "I was the one that had to take over for you at your meeting today after you decided to get a stomach ache. Either way, I do have a bit of good news for you though."

Kagami still wept from the attack and barely understood what he was talking about while she continued to cough and pump precious oxygen into her lungs.

"The board thought my plans for the firm was so thorough and robust that they want me to be present at the next meeting as well. I already promised them that I would because the associates still have little faith in you Kagami, and for good reason." Shido snarled with pride in himself. "So I figure we should celebrate. Now get undressed."

Kagami's eyes widened, allowing more water to flow from them as she struggled to sit up right. "You...you just...tried...to kill...me."

Shido rolled his eyes. "I don't have to kill you, Kagami. You're doing a damn good job at that yourself with the way you've been acting at work recently. I don't know what's wrong with you but I'll be damned if you infect me with it too. So take off your clothes and let's get very close... otherwise I'll strip you down myself and you know what that'll mean."

Kagami shuddered. It meant more bruises and more pain but she still found the courage to keep resisting as the pain in her throat continued to sting. "No, Koichi. Look at what you did to me...!"

Shido was becoming impatient and worse, angry. "Admit it; you liked it. I just might have to make that part of our bedroom routine from now on so this will be the last time I tell you. Strip it all off!"

Kagami knew what would happen if she didn't obey. She reluctantly nodded, dripping more tears from her eyes and she slowly stood and her trembling hands maneuvered towards her buttoned shirt. Slowly undoing the buttons, she continued to cry and think about that earlier conversation

with Konata about their relationship and what it meant for Kagami's current status. The more she thought about it, the more she saw that the scenario she was in was wrong on all levels, making it clearer when she was forced onto the bed again and her boyfriend was on top of her.

I am his woman after all. This is for the best. I need to be a role model for society. Forget about me, Konata. This is how my life is supposed to be. Live your life and find someone who will always be there for you.

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Still digesting everything that had happened at that meeting at the café, Konata stood in her bathroom and stared at herself in the mirror. Her skin was still losing its color but her rotting physical condition wasn't on her mind for once. She stared deep into her own eyes, as if she was trying to see her own soul. Despite the fact that she was alone in her apartment, Konata began to analyze and dissect herself from the inside-out. She verbalized her final report for only herself to hear because she needed to hear it. There was not going to be anymore procrastinating or second guessing on this issue.

"These things I feel..." Konata said to herself as she continued to stare at herself. "These unusual feelings I continue to dwell on that focus on Kagami."

"My whole life...I've strived to be different. My whole life I wanted an identity that made me unique and that would make others see me in a different light. I knew that some people would understand it while others wouldn't. Some would even take it a step further and hate it, maybe even

shun it. I never thought it was going to be as hard as it was but I still revel in my lifestyle."

"This world we live in...it's so hostile to people like me. We're all expected to fall in line like robots and bow down to the rules of society and are expected to behave in a certain way. I refused to do any of this and I continued to resist such people and issues that told me to do otherwise. This mindset cost me many friends and I always knew what it was like to be alone at school, so naturally I didn't like it so I turned to my games, where I was accepted for who I was, no matter what I was. But there was always one person there for me."

"She may not have understood my interests and sometimes she even mocked me for them...but I knew with her it was always different. She may not have understood, but she still cared enough to tagalong with me. Even when I was in high school, all I ever wanted was for someone to be there and just be by my side. She gave that to me."

"When her sister was robbed of her innocence and we became closer because of it, I began to feel all these things for her. I realized during that whole ordeal that love is love. It's never wrong and it's never disgusting. It's the purest of all human emotions and I wanted to share these feelings with only one person. So what if these feelings I'm now entrenched in aren't for a man? Does that even matter? They're for someone that I truly care about and in the end, isn't that what truly matters? But what about what society would say about this? How would this affect my family life? Would this affect my professional life?"

Konata took a long pause and finally came to a conclusion that brought tears of happiness to her eyes.

"These things I'm feeling...these urges I feel whenever I'm near her... they're not about sexual identity or even the politics of it. They're not about a bias towards another gender. These feelings are about...life. Life itself and how we choose to define it and who we let in it. I need to keep following the philosophy that I've lived by my whole life—to never let anyone but me dictate how I live my life. I want to spend my life with this woman. I'll finally admit it. I, Konata Izumi, am in love with Kagami Hiiragi. I love that woman with every bit of my entire existence. I want to become hers and I want her to become mine."

The sickly blue-haired woman still knew there was something about Kagami's relationship with Shido that she wasn't disclosing, but Konata didn't care...for now. All she wanted was to be with Kagami as she felt her body go numb again and she slowly slumped to the tile floor in her bathroom, keeping the toilet within range as another spew was inevitable.

"I admit it, Kagami. I love you. I've loved you for a long, long time. But... how much longer can I love you...? Will you ever love me back...?"

CHAPTER 6

Curled in the fetal position, Kagami shivered the next morning with her hair a mess and fanned out across her body. Only seven in the morning and Kagami's pillow was soaked in stains of her tears as she heard Shido prepare himself for another day at work, though most of her tears were spilled the previous night. Feeling immensely proud of himself, he tightened his black tie around his neck and continued to make himself look

professional without even acknowledging Kagami's existence when she woke up.

When he was finished he still stared in the mirror in their bedroom and asked, "You still sore from last night?"

Kagami quickly retracted tighter into her fetal position and continued to shake. "Why...why do you...have to be so rough with me? You can't forget that I'm...I'm a woman, you know. I don't like rough things in the bedroom. It hurts."

Shido's only response was to once again laugh at her misery as he turned to her. "All this training for you and you still can't take a little bit of pain with grace. You truly are a weakling, Kagami, just like your pathetic excuse for a twin sister. I recall a certain night a few years ago where she was too weak to fight off some men and she succumbed to what they wanted. What the strongest want in this world; that's all that matters. Only the fittest can take what they want and I believe your sister is no stronger now than when she was fucked."

Kagami's gritting teeth and squeezing frown forced more tears from her eyes as her body heated up and she quickly sat up, her hair wafting violently as she stared at Shido with a glare while keeping the bed sheets covering her naked body. It was a look that Kagami hadn't given Shido in a long time and it only occurred when he brought her family in the mix.

"How dare you?! You know what truly happened that night, Koichi!" Kagami exclaimed, her face burning red. "You know the hell my family and

I had to go through after that night, especially Tsukasa! We both almost died because of what had happened to her but she changed herself and now look at her! She's an international celebrity!"

"And then there's you, isn't there?" Shido was quick to reply and to Kagami's surprise, rather complacent. Normally when she raised her voice to him, it would result in physical abuse.

"Wh...what do you mean?" Kagami asked, suddenly forming a fist and holding it in front of her chest, her tell-all sign that she was becoming frightened.

Shido's sinister grin deepened and he continued as he slowly began to step forward. "Sure, everyone knows who your sister is, but what about you, Kagami? Didn't you once tell me that you wanted to be the most well-known lawyer in Asia? You worked so hard at it, too. After nearly dying by your own sister's hands, nearly dropping out of school, but still finishing college and Law School. Even taking some time abroad in America to gain more experience. A lot of impressive feats...for a blog or they might even make for a few good anecdotes but where are you today, Kagami? People still don't know who you are, you keep blowing opportunities to establish security for your firm, and you're letting everyone who works for you down. Seems all your hard work was for not, and you don't even have an excuse. Tsukasa was raped and yet she still came out on top somehow but what about you? It seems to me the only way you could ever make a name for yourself at this point is to have a repeat of Tsukasa's infamous New Year's Eve on yourself, or just kill yourself. The apartment is twenty stories up, not eight, so there's always that."

Kagami's eyes began to shift back and forth in her head as a sign of rising stress. She glanced at Shido's grin and quickly looked away again. "This... this isn't love, Koichi. You're...you're doing this just to hurt me. I don't understand why."

Shido placed a hand gently on Kagami's cheek, making her flinch initially until he began to softly rub the side of her face. "What would you know about love? After all, being born into a four-sibling household where your parents had to evenly divide their affection for all four of you. I can only imagine the burdens you placed on them, especially during your near-breakdown that made you cut your hair."

Kagami's emotions flared inside her. To this day, everything her boyfriend spoke of was very sensitive material and he was jabbing a pointed stick where it hurt the most. It was no secret that having four children put heavy burdens on Miki and Tadao when they were raising them, but they still wouldn't trade it for the world and did the best with what they had. However, Kagami still remembered and cringed every now and then at the memories of her crumbling mental state that made her butcher her hair all those years ago.

"Please stop talking about these things. They happened a long time ago and you know nothing about what my parents feel for us and each other. Despite everything that happened to us back then, they're still together to this day. They were able to look past everything both Tsukasa and I did because they're our parents and they love us. That's what love is, Koichi, so don't tell me I don't know anything about it!" Kagami showed her aggressive tsundere side for the first time in awhile.

Shido glared both outside and inside. He was getting closer at destroying Kagami but when it came to getting inside her head through her family, it always proved futile. It seemed that when it came to family matters, this was always Kagami's greatest strength but it was still her last line of defense. Shido was already making a name for himself inside her own firm but if he ever wanted to take everything that was hers, he needed to take out Kagami's family. His twisted mind suddenly concocted another plan as he stood.

"You're not well today, Kagami. You're taking a sick day from work." Shido ordered and stood again. "I think some time away from the office to give you a chance to clear your head will do you well. Maybe it'll even humble you a bit and give you an opportunity to snap yourself out of these strings of embarrassing failures you have plagued us both with."

Kagami glanced away and tightened her grip on the bed sheets. "I'm fine. I'll just come in a little later."

"And what will be your explanation to why you're so late?"

Kagami felt strength growing within her as she glared at Shido again. "Maybe I'll start to tell people how you've been treating me. I don't think any firm would be happy if they found out one of their lawyers is abusive towards his girlfriend. I could also just fire you."

Shido tightened his glare, but to Kagami's surprise, he began to laugh. "You fire me, Kagami?! Hysterical! Without me, you'll have nobody in your life and we all know that one of your biggest fears in life is being alone! Like I

told you before, if I leave, there will be nobody else in this world that'll love you like I do! Get that through your skull before I'm forced to beat it in!"

Hearing Shido resurrect her old fears of being and ultimately dying alone stiffened Kagami like a board. She looked away with a depressed expression on her face and began to slightly quiver again. The distraught woman slowly lifted the sheets higher, as if to cocoon herself in protection, which Shido took pleasure in seeing.

Smirking to himself, he walked towards her and to Kagami's surprise, he placed his hands gently on her shoulders and began to massage them, releasing some of the woman's stress. He suddenly squeezed her shoulder nerves with all his might, sending shockwaves of pain through her and she shrieked for him to stop as she struggled to free herself.

"Remember Kagami, if I see you at the office today, it's over between us. Understand?" He asked sinisterly while he tightened his grip on the ailing woman.

"Yes, yes, I promise! Please stop!" Kagami pleaded.

Shido abruptly released Kagami from his evil grasp and she fell back down to the bed and began her tears again. Covering her face and trying to disappear as she cried, Shido glanced at her nightstand and saw her cell phone sitting there and remembered last night. He never got to the bottom of where his girlfriend was but at the same time didn't really care. He did however believe that Kagami was hiding a secret rendezvous of some kind and Shido took the phone, opened it, and scrolled to the last call.

Konata Izumi. Never heard of her.

Shido saw the name of the blue-haired woman and her number as the most recent call and remembered before he spiked her water with ipecac that Kagami quickly left the office to take a call and this was the one. Shido's perverse mind believed that this could have potential to dig Kagami further into the hole he already forced her in so he decided to put this person named Izumi into his back pocket and save it for when he needed it. He placed her phone back on the nightstand and left his crying girlfriend alone...ironically using Kagami's fear of loneliness against her.

Before he left, Shido thought to himself, Kagami is still too damn strong when it comes to her family. I guess I'll have to start that part of my plan earlier than expected. I heard her niece and nephews were at her parents' house today. Perfect timing.

When she heard her door slam shut, Kagami wiped her tears away and continued to sniff. Now Shido's earlier words were beginning to sink into her mind about her law career and she began to question if she had truly done anything worthwhile. She wanted to become a very influential lawyer in Asia, yes, but so far despite all the hard work she put in, she never truly became a regular name. She even wrote several articles for different scholarly law journals, only to have them be turned away and with one critique that hurt her most stating that she didn't have enough experience to publish her material yet. She saw Tsukasa continue to succeed internationally but she wasn't jealous, rather envious instead.

Now Shido's words of nobody else loving her began to stick out and she hugged her legs to her chest while sitting on the bed. She initially resisted such words from him in the beginning but as time went on and after she lost contact with not only Konata, but the rest of her friends from high school and college, she couldn't help but feel that maybe he was right. Sure, Ayano was there working at Kagami's firm, but even she was always anxious to leave every night. Though Kagami didn't know it wasn't because of her, but because of Shido that she was so anxious to leave. Could it also have to do with an incident that occurred between Ayano and Misao Kusakabe a few years earlier?

A thought suddenly came to Kagami as she sat alone in her bedroom and she reached under her mattress and retrieved the picture of her trip to Kyoto with Konata, Tsukasa, and Miyuki. As she stared at Konata's vibrant green eyes, she smiled and began to think that maybe she wasn't completely alone after all. Subconsciously, Kagami slowly slid her index finger down the picture and gently rubbed the image of Konata's face as she continued to stare with trembling eyes. She stared at her lips and wondered what they would feel like to her touch.

Kagami gulped as she began to feel deeper things for this blue-haired otaku. She remembered the question that Konata had asked her yesterday about wanting to ask her a question but being too afraid of what the answer would be. It suddenly came to Kagami. She did mean it when she didn't want Konata to ask that question...because she was afraid that she would have to admit it to her blue-haired friend. The religious upbringing and the tabooed subject in a workplace and culture such as Kagami's didn't stop her from being human with her own sets of beliefs on how to live her life.

"I want...I want..." Kagami began and her fear mounted because now she had no choice but to face reality as the tears mounted. "I want you... Konata. I love you...yes...I admit it. I love you, Konata. But...I cannot

love you because what you said yesterday is true for me too. If I admit it to you...I'll never be able to let you go, either."

The day seemed to have flown by for Koichi Shido as he took Kagami's place for the day, attending meetings and giving speeches to fellow attorneys on how he would help bring the law firm back to its feet. He was very influential in his speeches and he began to win over some of the attorneys there, but it wasn't him completely that his colleagues were thinking about. It was Kagami's recent cold-streak that included her losing clients, mysteriously becoming ill, and now she wasn't showing up for work. They began to wonder if she was losing her ability to perform the job and handle all the stresses and pressures that came with it. Slowly but surely, Kagami's own fellow attorneys were beginning to lose faith in her and her law career was slowly moving closer towards jeopardy.

Ayano Minegishi however always had an intuition that was telling her something was wrong with this relationship. She had known Kagami for many years and sensed something was different about the tsundere when

she began coming to work as docile and meek as a kitten and it was always when Shido was by her side. Ayano also remembered seeing a bruise on Kagami's arm one day and the ailing woman's excuse was that she slipped in the bathtub. Though she shuddered at the possibility, Ayano had no choice but to suspect that Kagami was the victim of domestic abuse, but it was hard for her to believe. This was Kagami Hiiragi after all.

She continued to type on her computer outside Kagami's office when she saw the tall Koichi Shido walk towards her. Ayano squinted at him as he approached to show her discontent and suspicion of the man, but he breezed right past her as if she never existed. It was an alarming sight to see Shido invite himself into Kagami's office and make himself at home, as if he was planning on staying for a long time. For some reason, this made Ayano angrier as her facial expression showed. Perhaps she saw Shido's invasive movements as disrespectful to Kagami's hard work.

Standing from her office chair, Ayano entered Kagami's office, catching his attention as he sat behind his desk. "Good morning, sir."

Confused by Ayano's brisk movements and sudden influx of energy, Shido squinted back at her and replied sarcastically, "Morning."

"I couldn't help but notice that Kagami isn't here today. Is everything okay with her?" She asked in a rather stern voice.

Shido's glare disappeared and Ayano became more concerned when he smiled. "Yeah, she's fine. She's just taking a sick day."

Ayano hummed. "That's an unusual way to act when you say the woman you love is sick; saying it with a smile."

Rolling his eyes, Shido sighed and leaned back in his chair while resting his leg on his other knee, upsetting Ayano even more. The fact that he was so relaxed convinced her further that this man wasn't the same behind closed doors.

"Listen, Ayano. My relationship with Kagami is none of your business. I treat her the way she deserves to be treated." Shido retorted and clearly redefining how Kagami truly deserved to be treated. "Yeah, we've had our rough patches along the way, but then again is there truly a perfect couple? I would still wager that our relationship is far better than how yours turned out with the boyfriend you once had. Remember that breakup, Ayano? I do. It was so bad that it cost you your friendship with Kusakabe. Some friend you were...but Kagami proved to be better than you and provided you with a job here after the split."

Ayano clenched her fists at her hips and Shido reveled watching her eye twitch in pulsating anger. He was proud of himself for being able to crawl into the mind of one of the gentlest women out there and make her want to scream in anger. Shido could see that Ayano even wanted to leap across his desk and try to strangle him but it didn't surprise him when she didn't. Instead, Ayano took a deep breath and tried to quell her rising temper.

"It seems we're all capable of making mistakes, Shido. I do regret how it ended with Kusakabe's brother and that we're no longer friends because of it, but I'm done crying over it and I've moved on." Ayano said while clearing her throat. "Kagami is my friend and I care about her. If I see

anymore bruises on her, I will call the police myself, even if it means that I'll lose her as a friend as well."

Ayano turned and exited the office, leaving a slightly stunned Shido alone in the large room. He sighed deeply and dropped his pen on the desk and watched it roll until it rolled off the side and fell to the floor. Sitting back further into his chair, Shido rested his head in his open palm and began to think. He was getting closer to achieving his ultimate goal of acquiring Kagami's law firm, but yet another obstacle was standing in his way in Ayano Minegishi. She posed a minor threat to him...for now. He was still planning on Kagami's downfall through her family and he rolled up his sleeve to look at his watch, which read two o'clock.

I might as well head over there now and see what's facing me. I think the biggest challenge will be her parents, especially her father.

Koichi Shido gathered his things and decided to call it an early day. His excuse to the rest of the staff and lawyers at the firm was that he wanted to look after Kagami, which earned him more respect on the spot.

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Instead of driving back to Kagami's apartment to check on her and be with her, Shido took a trip to Saitama and eyed the familiar Hiiragi residence with the shrine complex just beyond their home. Grinning to himself, he stopped his car outside of their house and approached the front door. He heard the playful laughter of children inside and knew Kagami's niece and

two nephews were there, deepening his grin and he knew these kids were going to become pawns in his plan to destroy Kagami from the inside.

Standing in front of the door, he took a deep breath and instantly washed away all the impure thoughts in his mind and once again put on another mask for the Hiiragi family. He knocked on the door and happily proclaimed, "Anybody home?! It's me!"

The laughter of the children stopped and was replaced with the stampeding feet of them getting closer to the door. It suddenly swung open and Tsukasa's nine-year-old son Aito Shiraishi stood there with an excited face.

"Shido-sama! You came to visit us!" Aito exclaimed in his flamboyant childhood innocence, oblivious to what he was truly like underneath.

Shido bent down and hugged the child, who embraced him back. Aito took his hand and led him into the house, barely able to contain his excitement as he led him into the Hiiragi household and into the family living room. The living room of the Hiiragi home was now a playroom for children and Shido saw the always shy seven-year-old Kiyora Shiraishi and the newest addition to the family, Inori's two-year-old son Hisashi Hideyoshi crawled on the floor while Kiyora played with him. The bashful girl kept a teddy bear nearby and when she saw the towering man approach them, she slowly took the bear again and held it close, as if she was seeking a bodyguard.

"You kids aren't here alone, are you?" Shido asked in an impressive acting voice showing concern.

Aito shook his head quickly. "No, grandma and Aunt Matsuri are collecting laundry from outside."

Shido slowly nodded and bent down to them when Aito released his hand and added, "I see. And where are your daddy and grandpa?"

"Grandpa is at the shrine and daddy is at work. He'll be here later to pick us up!" Aito exclaimed happily. "How is Aunt Kagami? Are you two still together? Are you going to marry her?"

Shido laughed at the child's rambunctious attitude. "I wish I could give you an answer, Aito-chan, but grownup problems are a bit more complicated than the age you're at now. But you never know...maybe one day I'll be your uncle."

"I hope so! You're fun to be around! Plus you sometimes bring us candy!" Aito exclaimed.

The tall man dressed in black smiled again and reached into his coat pocket. "That reminds me...I have a bit of a problem, Aito-chan, and I think you can help me out."

"What's that?"

"Well, I came across all of these—" Shido stopped and quickly pulled out a few chocolate bars. "Candy bars and I can't possibly eat all of them by myself. How about you and your sister and your cousin help me out?"

Aito bounced up and down happily again and quickly took the scrumptious goods and began to share them with Kiyora and Hisashi as the sound of a sliding glass door opening was heard in the next room. Aito took command again and quickly charged to the back of the house.

"Grandma, Aunt Matsuri, Shido-sama is here!" He quickly exclaimed.

"Oh really? That's nice." Miki's familiar voice said politely.

Good...Kagami still hasn't told them anything about us. She really is weak.

Shido looked down at the shying Kiyora and couldn't help but shudder a bit upon seeing the tall man's eyes. He simply smiled and bent down to her as she pulled her teddy bear closer to her head.

"No need to be afraid of me, Kiyora-chan. You shouldn't hide a face as precious as yours." Shido said with a smile, which proved contagious as Kiyora began to grin while still holding her teddy bear tight, this time from embarrassment. "Are you looking after your brother?"

Tsukasa's daughter slowly began to come further out of her shell and nodded, keeping her smile.

"That's a good girl. I sure am feeling down right now and I could use a hug." Shido said with a sweet-sounding voice. "Do you know where I could get a hug, Kiyora-chan?"

The timid daughter of Tsukasa smiled widely and dashed happily to Shido and embraced him. As the two hugged, an aged but still majestic Miki Hiiragi walked into the living room and smiled at the sight of the tall man hugging her granddaughter. When Kiyora saw her grandmother, she deepened her smile and ran to her and Miki patted her on the head.

"Your aunt could use some help with folding laundry so how about you go give them a hand?" Miki said sweetly and Kiyora took her cousin Hisashi by the hand and led him to where Aito and Matsuri were folding laundry together.

"How have you been, Miki?" Shido asked with a sincere smile.

Miki, like the rest of the members of the Hiiragi family, was completely oblivious to the monster underneath the charming exterior that was Koichi Shido. She had no idea the abuse her daughter was suffering at the hands of this suited vulture. If she did, Miki would've kicked in the apartment door herself and take her daughter home if she needed to. She always saw Shido as the man that everyone else did; as a strong-witted, intelligent, charming man that any woman could fall in love with. Unfortunately, she couldn't

peer into his mind so she continued to see him as the all-around ideal man that was perfect for her daughter so she replied happily.

"I'm doing fine, Koichi. It's so nice to see you again, but where is Kagami?" Miki asked and looked around the room.

"I'm sorry but Kagami wasn't feeling well today. She had to take a sick day and everything." Shido replied with fake remorse in his voice.

"Oh dear, is she okay?" Miki asked and took a seat, as did Shido.

Shido nodded. "Yes, yes. I tried to stay home and take care of her but you know Kagami. She ordered me to go to work and wouldn't have it any other way. That daughter of yours, Miki, she never ceases to amaze me."

Miki deepened her smile. "Yes, she is quite amazing. So you just came out here to visit us?"

Shido nodded happily. "Of course! I love your family."

"And we love you, too." Miki added with gratitude.

The two continued to have a friendly dialogue with each other until Tadao returned to the household. It was then that the atmosphere suddenly changed. When he returned and saw Shido sitting in his living room drinking tea with his wife, he ignored the sight and bypassed them both.

Before Shido left for the day, he found Tadao trimming bushes around the side of their house and confronted him. "Well, sir, I'll be heading back to Tokyo now."

Tadao simply nodded while keeping his back turned.

Shido squinted at him with suspicion. "I do hope we get to have a more formal conversation next time we see each other."

As he turned and began to walk away, Tadao suddenly stopped trimming the bushes and kept his back turned. "You think you can fool me, Shido?"

Hearing the simple question froze the corrupt man and he slowly turned. "What do you mean, sir?"

Tadao suddenly turned and showed his aged complexion and through it, the sight of an angry father reared its head. "I know what kind of a man you are, Shido. You're an ambitious man, a real go-getter in life. The type who isn't afraid of a challenge and sees what he wants in life and who'll do anything to get it...no matter who you hurt in the end."

Shido remained calm as he continued to listen.

"What my daughter sees in a man like you I will never know. I will admit that it hurt me very deeply when she came to me and told me she was dating you, but I withheld my tongue and allowed Kagami to live her life as she saw fit. My daughter is a professional and would only use her training in Law to support and defend the freedoms of others, while you would use yours solely for profit." Tadao growled. "Our family has been through a lot together and one thing I've learned is to always watch out for people like you...who will forego all human emotions to get what they want. We learned that on New Year's Eve."

Shido glared for Tadao to see. "What is it you're trying to say, Tadao?"

There was a long, disturbing pause between the two men until Tadao added, "Nothing...except I know you and I know what you're capable of. I'll pray for you, but I'll pray for my daughter first and for her to see you the same way I do. When she does...you'll be alone."

Another silence fell between them until Tadao turned to continue trimming the bushes. Tadao was still oblivious to the physical and mental abuse on his daughter, but knew something was happening between Kagami and Shido which he accredited to his father's intuition. Shido stared at Tadao's backside for a few more moments until he too slowly turned and began to walk back to his car.

Before he could make it to his car, he heard Aito come up behind him and say, "Shido-sama, have a safe trip."

Shido quickly wiped away his glare and turned back to Aito, smiled, and bent down to him again. "Thank you, Aito-chan. Take good care of you sister for me."

Aito nodded happily.

As Shido began to stand again, he put his plan for Kagami's family into action and sighed bluntly for Aito to hear.

"Is there something wrong, Shido-sama?" He asked.

Shido smiled to himself but put on a depressed face for the boy. "Yes, yes, everything is fine...it's just...well, I don't think you're mature enough for this kind of talk yet."

Aito suddenly became flustered. "I am so mature, Shido-sama! Tell me! Tell me! Tell me!"

"Well, I'm only telling you this because I care about you. You know I care about you and your little sister, right?" Shido asked.

Aito nodded again.

"Well, it's about your Aunt Kagami. She has been acting differently lately." Shido began to twist the young boy's mind. "You see, Aito-chan, I became a lawyer because I care about people and I only want to help them. But I worry about your Aunt Kagami. In the beginning, your aunt was a very good lawyer and was like me, but now, I believe that she is becoming corrupt."

"Corrupt?" Aito asked.

"It means that Aunt Kagami only cares about money and power and she doesn't truly want to help people." Shido replied. "To be honest, I don't think she even loves you or your sister at all. If you were in trouble, I don't think she would come to your rescue."

Hearing these harsh words made Aito gulp. "But...but...but Aunt Kagami always says she loves me and Kiyora...always."

"Oh I know little buddy, I know...but I think she's lying to you." Shido said in a sensitive tone and knew he was moving his plan along when tears began to form in Aito's eyes. "Lying hurts, doesn't it, Aito-chan?"

Aito wiped his tears away and nodded.

Shido quickly hugged him and added, "Now, now, it'll be okay. I'll always be here for you, unlike your Aunt Kagami, who even told me she didn't

want to see you today. Now can you be a good boy and keep this between us men?"

Aito pulled away and nodded again as he continued to tear up.

"Are you my little buddy?" Shido asked with a smile.

The distraught child nodded and tried to smile but couldn't. Shido convinced him to keep the conversation between them and when Shido allowed Aito to return to his calling grandmother, he sat in his car and grinned to himself. As he drove back to Tokyo, he couldn't help but think to himself.

The fuse is lit, Kagami. Now it's only a matter of time. Although...that Tadao...he's going to be a problem. I'm going to have to take care of him myself...

*A/N: Yeah I know it was a boring chapter but remember this one...it'll become important down the road. Consider this one of the last calms before the storms. Also, I want to try something new. I want all of your opinions: what do you think should happen to Shido in the end? Should he live? Should he die? Write what you would like to see in a review, PM, whatever you want and stay tuned...

CHAPTER 7

Sitting in the doctor's office once again the next day, Konata was called back by Dr. Honda to discuss her ongoing strife. Today, her body was freezing despite the warm weather outside as the heavy coat wrapped around her showed. She shivered despite the padded clothing while producing cold sweat across her forehead and the doctor suddenly came in with her files.

"Ms. Izumi, I ran more blood work for you and I really, really wish I could give you good news." He said as he took a seat and opened it. "The disease is continuing to mutate despite the medication I prescribed to you. The drugs should have slowed it down but it's still forming inside your body and taking its natural course, only it seems to be speeding up."

Konata lowered her head with her now usual depressed face and through her chattering teeth asked, "Any idea why?"

Dr. Honda scratched his chin and sighed. "My only hypothesis is that the disease seems to be making up for lost time because you didn't birth any children like I told you before. When your mother contracted it, the physical strains of childbirth sped up the disease until she passed away from it. You're not a mother so your body didn't have to go through those strains so it seems the disease is aware of this and is speeding up on its own."

The blue-haired woman held her arms together across her chest and quickly rubbed to produce more heat. "But if it's speeding up...does this mean I have less than six months to live?"

By this point, Konata knew all of Dr. Honda's ticks and he gave a grave face, which only added more angst to Konata's situation. "I'm afraid so, Ms. Izumi. The lab results are now telling me you have about two months. I'm sorry."

"And there's no cure?" Konata asked meekly while slouching her posture, as if she was trying to curl up and disappear.

"I'm sorry to say but this disease doesn't even have a name yet, ma'am." Dr. Honda stated. "Only a few cases existed before this and they were so few and far between that medical science labeled them as coincidences, but I think that will change. I wish I could tell you there was a cure, but that's not the reality of this situation."

Konata continued to hug herself tightly, both to keep herself warm and as a way of physically holding herself together and not triggering a meltdown. A long and ominous pause fell between the two.

"If you want, I can admit you to a hospital now and they can make you very comfortable for the remaining time there is left." Dr. Honda added with deep sympathies in his voice.

Konata looked up and shook her head. "No, I don't want that. I just got back into contact with an old friend that I hadn't seen in a few years and I don't want her to know about this. I don't want to spend this time left waiting for her to see me during any visiting hours."

Dr. Honda nodded. "I understand. The disease will continue to grow but you'll still be able-bodied enough to function up until the end, but please, if you need it, don't hesitate to call me if you need to be admitted. I can prescribe a new brand of narcotics to you but make sure you take just one of these a day; these things are very powerful."

The last thing Konata wanted was more medication. Like any other person in her position, all she wanted was a clean bill of health. Regardless, she took the prescription with her cold, clammy hand and slowly walked out of the office with the only thing on her mind being sleep, though it was probably going to be another futile attempt. The mental stress created by this disease was getting just as bad as the physical pain. Last night, Konata was only able to get two full hours of sleep while the disease kept her awake. She was very sleepy, yet her body wouldn't let her go to sleep as she continued to sweat and feel her temperature rise and drop while it triggered vomiting episodes.

Konata looked at herself in the mirror and saw her face was still pasty from the loss of color but thankfully her head was still lush with blue hair despite how much had fallen out already. The mole on the side of her face just below her eye seemed to be both darker and larger now but it was because of how much color Konata had lost in her skin color.

Her body continued to drip large drops of sweat off her body despite her cooler temperature and her vision began to blur. Life was becoming increasingly unbearable and Konata began to think certain thoughts. She sat and watched the speeding traffic in front of her from the parking lot and contemplated bad ideas.

It would be so quick...so painless...and then it would be over. I could even close my eyes as I walked out into the middle of that traffic. No more waiting to die...no more pain...no more drugs...no more throwing up...and I would finally be able to sleep.

A sign from above showed itself when Konata's cell phone began to ring. The clamoring didn't faze the dying woman but she still looked at her phone sitting on the passenger seat next to her and her eyes suddenly shot open. The digital screen showed Kagami's name as the incoming call and Konata's trembling hands slowly picked up the phone; her sweaty fingers nearly making her drop it.

"He...hello...?" Konata choked.

Silence was the only response, which was followed by breathing.

"Hello? Kagami?" Konata asked again, praying this wasn't a trick.

Konata could hear someone clear their throat and Kagami's voice suddenly vocalized. "Er...yes Konata, it's me. I was just...um...how are you?"

Confused by the blunt question, Konata replied meekly. "I'm fine, and how are you?"

"Good...listen I was thinking about our conversation yesterday...and I would like to talk to you about it. Would you come to my home tonight?" Kagami quickly asked.

Konata's heart began to pound in her chest. Her mouth as dry as cotton, Konata stuttered initially until she squeaked out, "I would be happy to. When and where?"

Kagami provided her friend with the location of her apartment building and to meet her at seven o'clock that evening. It was only noon when Kagami called so for seven hours, Konata's heart was not going to stop its restless thumping. The blue-haired woman sat in her apartment for the entire time, checking her watch every thirty seconds to see how much time had passed, though doing so only brought her closer to insanity. The fact that she continued to isolate herself from the outside world only made it worse for her patience because now she actually had something to look forward to.

Konata was also becoming increasingly annoyed with all the text messages and voicemails Hiyori was leaving for her, this time though they were all out of concern instead of about work. Hiyori was becoming concerned that her friend and business partner had seemed to have completely dropped off the radar and wasn't producing anymore ideas for a new manga. It was as if Konata was trying to disappear and she still didn't know about the unknown disease that was now rapidly killing her friend and business partner.

As Konata sat alone on her bed, she slowly reached under it and retracted a photo album. Opening the thick pages, Konata paged through the large book until she came to a series of photos that brought her happiness for the first time since she had her reunion with Kagami. They were of the infamous trip to Kyoto and several were of just Konata and Kagami

together with luscious scenery behind them, adding more of a romantic feeling.

It suddenly struck Konata. She turned the page again and saw a copy of the photo Kagami was hiding under her mattress of the two of them together in the photo booth with Tsukasa and Miyuki. This picture was a lot like the copy Kagami had stashed, only with one addition on it. Konata gently removed the picture from the page and turned it around, revealing another poem written on the back.

"I remember when I wrote this." Konata couldn't help but vocalize to herself in the empty apartment as she reminisced about it. "I wrote this poem after we got home from Kyoto and I got off the phone with Kagami. I made fun of her, asking if she put this picture anywhere special. I always made fun of her and joked around back then as my defense mechanism to mask and even hide the feelings I had for her. When she hung up on me, I couldn't hold it in anymore and I wrote what I wanted to say to her."

Konata reread the poem to herself.

I got off the phone with you,

Sitting on my bed, don't know what to do.

Thinking of you will hinder my sleep,

Thinking of you, my heart pounds so deep.

I wish this trip I could've said

What I truly thought in my head.

Waiting for that fateful day,
when I can hold your hand and say,
my one and only love is you.

I know this love is true,
you, this person you mean the world,
You make my stomach do twists and twirls,
I'll always have a love for you,
Kagami, my love one and true.

Feeling more depressed about her situation, Konata sealed the photo back into place on the page. She closed the photo album and hugged it to her chest and couldn't help but fall to her side on her mattress. Konata retracted into a human ball and it pushed the photo album closer to her chest; it seemed the blue-haired woman wanted the large book to sink into her body and be absorbed by her heart.

She could feel her heart's rhythmic pulses against the hardcover book and knew her nerves were beginning to work against her before she even faced the situation. It soon became clear that she didn't even know why Kagami wanted to see her aside from the fact that she wanted to follow-up on their previous conversations. The anticipation was killing Konata's sanity. Did Kagami feel the same way she did and wanted to confess to her, or was it something else? Did it have anything to do with Kagami's relationship with her boyfriend? The fear of the unknown was also getting to her.

Even though she destroyed the large clock hanging on her wall the other day, she could still hear the incessant ticking in her mind. If it wasn't about her life slipping away, it was now about her upcoming meeting with Kagami. The mental stress continued yet somehow Konata found the strength within her to keep it together until the day wore on and her meeting time approached.

Konata's knuckles turned white as she kept a tight grip on her steering wheel and her perspiration increased as she approached the residential development where Kagami lived. The first thing Konata saw was how upscale this development was. Apartment buildings towered high above her and the landscaping for each tower was just as impressive with green grass, colorful flowers, and trees filled with abundant supplies of green leaves. The setting sun made the colorful surroundings all the more vivid when Konata spotted the apartment building Kagami was living in and parked her car.

Barely able to pry her hands off the steering wheel, Konata took a deep breath and exhaled bluntly, as if trying to force the inevitable awkwardness out. She exited her car and immediately had to look up. The apartment building was massive and fashionable; something a high-end lawyer would

be living in. Konata pictured Kagami's apartment to be more of a luxurious penthouse more than anything as her quivering knees carried herself to the door and it took her awhile to find Kagami's buzzer.

When she finally found it and forced her sweaty finger to push it, she anxiously awaited.

"Hello?" Kagami's voice asked.

"It...it's me..." Konata stuttered.

"Come on up."

Konata breathed deeply and walked into the luxurious lobby, awe-struck by the scale of it but she was still able to ignore everything and find her way to the elevator and pressed the button for the twentieth floor. The sinking feeling Konata felt in her stomach when the elevator launched her upward only added to her mounting physical and mental stress and the blue-haired woman could almost hear her heartbeat.

When Konata exited the elevator and found Kagami's door, she took one final breath. Instinctively, her flamboyant personality returned when she rang the doorbell. The blue-haired woman was scared of being near the woman she loved the most and her defense mechanisms kicked in to masquerade her rising panic. Like in high school, it worked like a charm and Konata's fearful persona disappeared when the door opened and Konata and Kagami locked eyes once again.

"Hello, Kagamin!" Konata happily exclaimed. "It's great to see an apartment as nice as this hasn't been burned to the ground yet by your cooking skills!"

"Oh shut up!" Kagami retorted and held the door open for Konata to enter. "Anyway, welcome to my home."

The inside of the apartment was just as fancy as the outside. Konata's earlier intuition was right as Kagami's apartment was in the style of a fancy penthouse with very expensive furniture all around and different spacious rooms. The complex resembled the layout of a house with all its twists and turns and even a staircase that led to an upper loft. Prints of famous paintings hung from the walls and Kagami led Konata into the living room.

This room was also amazing with more expensive furniture and wall hangings, some including family pictures. Konata took a seat on the large sofa as Kagami prepared drinks for them and her green eyes suddenly caught something sitting on the coffee table in front of her. Several magazines were stacked neatly on top of each other with an older copy of an international political magazine with Tsukasa's picture on it.

Konata picked up the magazine and began to thumb through it until she saw the article about Tsukasa. It was a story about the tragedy that befell her and it included a one-on-one interview with her and the editor with Tsukasa telling her side of the story. Konata was surprised to see how much Tsukasa had opened up about her drug problem after she was raped and her close call with death because of it. The photos included the majestic Tsukasa

sitting in a chair with the interviewer sitting across from her, both of them smiling and laughing.

"I remember when she did that interview. It was in America when she spoke with people from The Economist about the issue of violence against women across the world." Kagami said as she came into the living room with two white wines in her hands.

Konata smiled, closed the magazine, and placed it back on the table as she rested back on the sofa and took the white wine. She took a sip of the beverage as Kagami took a seat in another chair across from Konata.

"She's amazing. You guys should be very proud." Konata said with a smile.

Kagami's first response was to imitate Konata's smile. "We are. She never ceases to make us proud. I've been thinking about driving back to Saitama soon to see her kids."

Konata nodded. "So what did you want to talk about?"

Seeing Kagami nearly choke on her wine triggered Konata to believe that things were about to get real when even the tsundere was clearly scared. She cleared her throat and said, "Well, Konata, I just wanted to clear the air about yesterday. I didn't mean to be so dismissive of you. It's just that you caught me by surprise with that question and I guess I didn't know how to respond to it."

Konata shook her head slowly with a happy face. Kagami wondered why Konata's head shake was so slow but she didn't know it was because Konata was trying to preserve every last blue follicle on her head. Konata kept her upbeat attitude and added, "Don't worry about it, Kagamin. I was just caught in the heat of the moment of seeing you for the first time in so long."

Kagami sighed in relief to herself and allowed herself to smile again. "Well, I was happy to see you, too. I can't believe that out of the entire city of Tokyo that we went to the same café. You must live pretty close then."

Konata nodded. "I do and that surprised me, too. It only took twenty minutes for me to get here."

The new revelation made Kagami giggle in amazement. "That truly is unbelievable, Konata. So since you're here why don't you tell me more about yourself? Have you spoken to Yutaka recently?"

Konata nodded. "I did. She called me from Germany to check in and to see how the progress was going with me and Hiyorin's work. To be perfectly honest though, we've been kind of in a funk lately and that dinner I had at her house with her husband turned into more of a social call than a business meeting."

Seeing that Konata was okay talking about it, Kagami giggled and couldn't help but add more. "Yeah I totally know what you mean. It's the same for me, too, but I think a lot of people have that problem. You set up a time to

meet with some people to discuss serious topics for work or whatever and it somehow turns into a night on the town."

Kagami and Konata shared the laugh as it proved true for them in their adult years. The conversations carried on for over an hour and the two women continued to reminisce about the good old days and how life seemed easier back then. If only their conversation stayed simple when Konata inadvertently opened Pandora's Box with what seemed to be a rather trivial question at first.

"Say Kagami, I was wondering...where is this boyfriend of yours? I want to meet the man who was able to tame my favorite tsundere!" Konata exclaimed.

Hearing the question made Kagami's heart skip a beat. She nearly dropped her wine glass and stuttered initially. "He...he...he's out, actually. A few associates from our firm called him and invited him out for drinks and to discuss business."

Konata raised her eyebrows. "And you're not with him? It's your firm, isn't it? Shouldn't it be you your associates are talking to?"

The question prompted Kagami's eyes to dart in every direction as she struggled to form a sentence. "Well, uh, you know. Koichi is a hard worker and he deserves recognition. Things have just been...kind of strange recently. He hasn't been...acting...like he used to when we first met."

"How did you guys first meet anyway?" Konata asked as she crossed her legs.

Kagami cleared her throat. "It was about two years ago when we first met but we've been dating for the past eight months. I met him at a law convention in Tokyo and he actually took the initiative and introduced himself to me and he said he was an admirer of Tsukasa and her story and that's what made him want to become a lawyer. I thanked him and everything but I wasn't interested in pursuing a romantic relationship, which he was fine with...at first."

"At first?"

Kagami nodded. "We became friends with mutual respect for the law, but it wasn't until I received an email from Tsukasa when she and her family were on vacation in Australia. They sent me pictures and they all looked so... happy together. I saw Aito and Kiyora running and playing on the beach while Tsukasa and Minoru walked side-by-side together holding hands and I had to admit; I was jealous. It made me realize that I was getting older and that I wanted someone to be by my side, too."

Konata slowly nodded. "I understand why you would feel that way."

"But then he changed and one day he started hitting—" Kagami began and suddenly zipped her lip while her face went pale. She hoped Konata didn't hear that last part.

"Hitting? Hitting what?" Konata asked with a stern voice, proving Kagami's hopes to be false.

Dead silence fell between them and each second was agonizing.

"Kagami...tell me. What has he been hitting?" Konata asked again with more firmness and she showed a side of herself Kagami didn't know existed.

Kagami quickly turned away. "It...it's none of your business."

"Has he been hitting you? Did he ever hurt you?" Konata asked with growing emotions in her voice.

The conversation between the two women was going south quickly. Kagami quickly stood and walked out of the living room with her glass but Konata wasn't going to let this issue go. She quickly followed her.

"Konata...things can get heated in a relationship. You don't understand. What Koichi and I have real; he loves me...he just has a hard time expressing it." Kagami said with her back turned to her as she looked out the balcony window and at the Tokyo skyline ahead.

"If by expressing it you mean him taking his hands to you then I'd say he's probably doing a damn good job at it!" Konata exclaimed, prompting

Kagami to turn and was shocked to see the flustered blue-haired woman. She was angry.

"Konata, calm down. I need Koichi in my life and yes, he has...put his hands on me...but it was always to make me a better person." Kagami quickly replied. "And besides...I think Koichi is planning on proposing to me soon and I will accept it when he does."

To Kagami's further surprise, Konata scrunched her face and formed a very angry glare. The upset blue-haired woman began to breathe hard until she replied, "He's a woman beater. You need to leave him, Kagami. And for you to say that you love him and would accept a marriage proposal from him... why are you trying to make a fool out of me?"

Hearing this confused Kagami even more. Why would Konata ask this? It wasn't as if she had a stake in Kagami's love life yet she showed a very angry side regarding it. Kagami quickly retorted, "I'm...I'm not making a fool of you, Konata. Why are you acting like this? Do you want me to remain half a person for the rest of my life? To remain incomplete?"

It was Kagami's last sentence that started it all. Konata's usual flamboyant personality disappeared and her face presented more anger. Her grip on her wine glass tightened and her teeth began to grit as her face burned red. It all happened so fast. Only five minutes ago the two friends were laughing and carrying on and now, a war of drama was on the horizon.

"Is that what I am to you?! Just an incompleteness?!" Konata yelled at the top of her lungs, turned, and threw the wine glass with all her might across the

room away from Kagami. The glass shattered and threw shards everywhere, making Kagami go on the defensive.

"Konata, get a hold of yourself! What's wrong with you?!" Kagami exclaimed.

"What's wrong with me?! What's wrong with you?!" Konata replied as she covered her face with her hands. "I don't even know who you are anymore, Kagami! The Kagami I know would never let anyone treat her with disrespect now matter who or what they were! You went from being a pillar of strength to goop in this creep's hands and for what?! So you could have what other people have?! So you can fit in because you believe society expects you to?! I saw the way you acted when I brought up your boyfriend at the café the other day! He's beaten you before, hasn't he?!"

Kagami frowned and became angry again. "This is none of your business, Konata!"

"It is my business! You are my business, Kagami!" Konata whipped her hands away from her face, exposing her crying eyes. "You don't think I see who you are underneath this lifestyle?! You're just a scared little girl screaming for someone to save you and guess what?! It'll never be Shido! I don't even know the bastard and I can already tell you he doesn't love you! Wake up!"

Something snapped. Something dwelling inside Kagami's mind snapped and as Konata continued to scream at her, Kagami flattened her palm and with sharp movements, ran it swiftly across Konata's face. The slap echoed

throughout the apartment and a horrible silence followed after it. Kagami barely knew she did it but when she saw the red mark across Konata's face, she too felt her eyes flood with tears.

"Kon...Kona...Konata..." Kagami stuttered through her choking voice.

Without saying a word, Konata quickly turned and retreated to the living room. She grabbed her purse and Kagami's heart sank when she saw her blue-haired friend speed towards the front door.

"Konata, wait! Wait, Konata! Wait!" Kagami screamed as she chased after her. When Konata's hand wrapped around the doorknob, she felt her free arm become prisoner of Kagami's grip and she could still hear her pleas for her to stay.

The fight wasn't over. Konata frowned again and quickly turned to Kagami and the taller woman was expecting an eye for an eye from the shorter blue-haired, triggering her to close her eyes and wait for Konata to slap her. Anyone could've imagined her surprise when Kagami felt Konata's hands grab her by the shirt and pull her down. She suddenly felt a new sensation but it wasn't one of pain and it wasn't on the side of her face; instead, she felt a soft touch on her lips and when Kagami opened her eyes again, she saw Konata's lips were on hers.

Kagami's eyes went big as Konata's were sealed shut as she held her in the kiss. Taking a few seconds to process what had just happened, Kagami suddenly began to struggle when she realized she wasn't dreaming but Konata held her firm and the two women suddenly sank to their knees.

Konata finally released Kagami from the kiss and leaned back, opening her tear-soaked eyes and looking into Kagami's leaking violet pools of color.

Both breathing hard, Kagami and Konata continued to stare at each other after their first kiss. After a long silence, Kagami whispered in a stern voice, "Don't you ever do that to me again, do you understand?"

Hearing this only increased the flows of tears from Konata's eyes as she stood up again. She cleared her throat and simply said, "You better realize who you truly are, Kagami...before it's too late."

Konata opened the door and as she walked out, Kagami made one last plea for her to stay but it was too late. The blue-haired woman slammed the door behind her and left Kagami alone in the empty apartment. Kagami, still holding her hand out, slowly retracted it to her chest and released more tears. She began to cry on the floor at how the evening ended and because of what she felt. She could only utter the three words she had wanted to say to Konata ever since she arrived at her apartment to begin with.

"I love you."

CHAPTER 8

"You can't catch me, Kiyora!" Aito exclaimed as the two children raced around their family's shrine complex in Saitama. The two children were living the days of their youth to the fullest while they played as they were carefully watched by their loving Aunt Matsuri.

Matsuri Hiiragi hadn't changed her over all physical appearance throughout the years while keeping her hair short and in the same style as her earlier days. Though she was nearing forty, she, just like the rest of the women in the Hiiragi family, inherited their mother's good genes as she still looked younger than she was. Matsuri swept the cobblestone path of the recently fallen cherry blossom petals and couldn't help but smile to herself as she heard her niece and nephew play.

She took a break from her sweeping and looked up to see the two children running and playing happily. Aito continued to run around the red lamps as his little sister gave chase, also laughing. Smiling at their innocence, Matsuri couldn't help but remember all the times she played with her sisters at this very shrine when they were kids. Everything about this complex became synonymous with innocence and harmony for the Hiiragi family, as the echoes of the next generation of Hiiragi children proved.

It wasn't until Matsuri watched her niece and nephew chase each other closer to a small flower garden that her smile disappeared and her eyes widened in fright. As the two kids approached the patches of green grass and colorful flowers, she dropped her broom and quickly dashed after them.

"Kids! Kids! Hey hold on a second!" She exclaimed, catching them by surprise. "Don't go in there...it's uh...not safe!"

"But they're just flowers, Aunt Matsuri!" Aito exclaimed as he puffed up his chest and Kiyora quickly took shelter behind him, her usual reclusive personality showing itself now.

"I know, I know, but you know I don't like it when you two come over to this part of the shrine." Matsuri said tenderly as she bent down to them and placed her hands on each of their shoulders. "There are things about this place that you don't know about and aren't old enough to understand yet."

"Um...Aunt Matsuri...?" The timid bell-like voice of Kiyora announced itself as she stood up from behind her big brother. "You've told us not to come near these flowers before but you never told us why. They're so pretty after all...so why can't we play in them?"

"Yeah! Why not!" Aito's blunt expression was more direct and in Matsuri's face than the shy Kiyora and Matsuri didn't know how to answer.

Matsuri lifted her eyes up and stared at the peaceful miniature meadow of flowers. They were there when Aito and Kiyora were born, but they were added to the Hiiragi property long before that. The two children didn't know it, but they were standing at the former entrance of the old Kagura-den, the same building where a crime so heinous befell their mother and it nearly cost her her life during the events that followed. Matsuri shuddered on the inside and knew that if Tsukasa had succeeded in her final suicide attempt that rainy February night, she wouldn't be talking to her niece or nephew. Despite that, she knew that it was a true miracle that she was blessed with these two children but continued to search for a way out of her predicament in explaining the limits of their fun on the family shrine.

Matsuri suddenly heard footsteps behind her and she quickly turned her head. Her stress level was quickly reduced when she saw her older sister Inori walk up the path by herself with her hands joined together in front of

her navel. The shrine maiden breathed a sigh of relief and turned back to Aito and Kiyora.

"Hey guys, how about you do me a favor and feed the koi in the pond? I'm sure they're hungry so you know where the food is." Matsuri said with a smile.

"But Aunt Matsuri, we want to know why we can't play in the flowers." Aito added with a growing frown.

Matsuri sighed again. "I promise you we'll explain it to you and your sister when you get a little bit older. So feed the koi, please?"

Kiyora tugged gently on her brother's shirt sleeve as she wanted to feed the fish. Aito groaned again and took his sister's hand and led her to the koi pond as Matsuri stood again and Inori made her final approach to her sister.

"They still want to play in these flowers, don't they?" She asked with concern.

Matsuri nodded.

"Well, maybe it's time you let them. I know we planted all of these flowers here to replace the Kagura-den after it was burned down and as our way of showing something more beautiful rising from the ashes, but the kids seem

to like it." Inori added as she watched Aito and Kiyora walk towards the fish pond.

Sighing, Matsuri turned and retorted, "I understand where you're coming from, but it still haunts me to this day. Call it crazy but I'm uncomfortable watching my niece and nephew play where their mother was...you know..."

Inori nodded slowly with remorse. "I do, but they practically live here so you might want to reconsider it."

"So what's going on, Inori?" Matsuri asked, trying to redirect the already painful conversation.

"Nothing much. I'm just dropping Hisashi off before I go to work." Inori replied, though her eyes told a different story. "However, since you asked, there is one thing I was hoping to talk to you about. It's about Kagami."

Matsuri slowly stood and nodded. "So you've noticed, too."

Inori nodded back. "She's been acting differently lately. I tried calling her recently to check in and she was very reluctant to talk and I heard Shido's voice in the background. After he stopped talking, Kagami's voice changed and she cut our conversation short and made up some excuse to get off the phone. I think Shido was telling her to get off the phone and not speak to us."

Matsuri squinted. "Is that your opinion as an analyst at that business firm you work for?"

Inori shook her head. "No...it's my intuition as an older sister. I think Shido is trying to keep Kagami away from us; maybe he's even attempting to control her life. I wouldn't even rule out the possibilities of physical abuse."

Matsuri turned to make sure Aito and Kiyora were out of hearing range before she continued this conversation with her sister. When she saw the children approach the koi pond with a small bag of food in their hands and saw they were out of range, Matsuri breathed a sigh of relief and turned back to Inori.

"Careful how you talk around the children. Aito really looks up to Shido and Kiyora is scared enough of strangers as it is yet it seems that that guy is slowly cracking her shell. Are you sure you want to entertain ideas such as that regarding Shido?" Matsuri asked as she began to sweep again.

Inori nodded. "You're right, Matsuri...I am an analyst by profession and it's my job to listen and interpret what I see and report as I deem fit, however, that also means I cannot ignore what's in front of me. Something's happening behind closed door between Kagami and Shido."

Matsuri frowned and her grip tightened around her broom. "I know dad has been feeling that way too, but if he feels that Kagami is in trouble, why doesn't he investigate matters himself? Why don't you go?"

"Because it's different now. Kagami is an adult and fully capable of making her own decisions. She's smart enough to know what's right and wrong in a relationship and where would she be in life if dad or I kept coming to her rescue?" Inori replied. "I just hope my intuition is wrong and she's just working really hard and that's why she's been keeping her distance from us lately."

Inori couldn't help but notice Matsuri's sweeping began to speed up; a tell-all sign that Matsuri was beginning to feel anger. The oldest Hiiragi daughter squinted at the sight and released an internal sigh.

"What else is bothering you, Matsuri?" Inori asked passively.

Matsuri suddenly stopped and quickly turned. To Inori's surprise, the former rebellious middle Hiiragi daughter was forming tears in her eyes and her cheeks burned red. "It...it's just that...why would they leave?"

"What do you mean?"

"I'm sorry you have to see me like this, Inori." Matsuri hiccupped as she wiped a tear away. "It's just that ever since we were kids and even though Kagami and I clashed at times, I never once stopped loving her. Even when Tsukasa was...hurt like that all those years ago...and what she became after that...I never stopped loving her. They're my sisters. I remember that night when Tsukasa was raped and we spent the night in the hospital...I blamed myself for not being there for her and I couldn't stop punching doors and walls in the bathroom. I always acted so headstrong and tough...so that

neither you, nor Tsukasa, or even Kagami would have to. I always wanted to bear your burdens for you. And to even think that Kagami might be in an abusive relationship is gutting me because I know you're right, Inori. Kagami is an adult and does know right from wrong and can make her own decisions...and even now I can't be there for her and pull her out of that relationship myself."

Inori quickly embraced her younger sister and held her tight. Matsuri was clearly upset about the different situations for both Tsukasa and Kagami. Ever since they were kids, all Matsuri wanted to do was to play the tough one and pounce on anybody who laid a finger on her beloved little sisters. Yet that one tragic New Year's Eve and Kagami's current hidden situation only proved that Matsuri couldn't be everywhere all the time, which upset her deeply. Though Matsuri was rough around the edges at times, she was one of the most caring members of the Hiiragi family.

Inori was so busy embracing her sister, neither one of them noticed that Aito slowly approached from behind. Kiyora was still busy feeding the fish with the last bits of food while Aito was about to talk to Matsuri about finding more food so his sister could keep having fun. When he saw his shrine maiden aunt in the embrace of his other aunt and crying, he quickly hid behind a tree and listened closely as Matsuri pulled away.

"Look, I understand that Kagami is a hard worker and does want to make the right decisions, but she won't come and visit us anymore. She won't even answer any of my calls anymore and it seems to me that Kagami's interest in us and her family here is disappearing." Matsuri said and Aito's eyes went big when he heard this from behind his cover. He instantly thought about what Shido told him the other day as Matsuri continued. "No matter what their situation is like, if Kagami will continue to avoid seeing her niece and nephew the way she's been doing, then there's nothing more

we can do about it. Kagami is just putting her priorities elsewhere and not on these children."

Aito's heart sank again as he sat down behind the tree and thought, Shido-sama was right. Aunt Kagami doesn't love me or my sister...

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Kagami stared blankly at her paperwork later that day at the office. Today was supposed to be a routine event for her but the last place anyone would find Kagami's mind was at the workplace. One fresh memory was replaying itself over and over again in her mind. Kagami continued to see Konata's face on hers and could still feel the petal-like touch of her lips against hers and her heart continued to race. It felt so surreal and she wondered if that truly happened.

That was the first time she had kissed another woman and the experience should've felt revolting, wrong, and immoral. However, Kagami didn't interpret it that way. Kagami resisted Konata's kiss initially, but it was only half-hearted and she only resisted because she felt she was obligated to. Instead of feeling violated, she felt a rush of excitement, adrenaline, and happiness. Even when she ordered Konata to never kiss her again, it felt like it was a forced statement and it hurt her to say it. What hurt her even more was the look in Konata's eyes when she slapped her.

The piercing slap still echoed in Kagami's head and she could still feel Konata's soft flesh against her hand. Why did it have to end like that? Why

couldn't Kagami muster the strength and admit to Konata that she was in love with her?

Kagami finally admitted that today's work was going to be in vain and she tossed her pen on her desk and sat back in her chair. She glanced around her office and she sat alone in the large room, knowing her boyfriend and partner was gracing the hallways of her firm and charming her associates. Feeling the full weight of confusion on her shoulders pulling her down, Kagami sighed bluntly and covered her face with her hands as she rested her elbows on her desk and leaned forward.

Konata...I'm so sorry. Why am I such a coward? You were only trying to help me and how did I repay you? I hit you. But I'm also relieved. Now I know how you feel. I need to tell you too...but how can I...?

Hearing a light knock on her closed office door ripped Kagami from her personal thoughts and she looked up. It wasn't Shido because he never had the courtesy to knock. Regardless, she said, "Come in."

Seeing Ayano Minegishi walk in with her usual happy atmosphere and carrying a cup of coffee brought a smile to Kagami's face. Ayano approached Kagami and said, "Hey there, I thought you could use this."

"Thank you very much and I could actually." Kagami replied and took the steaming beverage from Ayano and swallowed a large sip. "I didn't get much sleep last night anyway."

"Why's that?" Ayano asked as she folded her hands behind her back.

Seeing Kagami's reluctance to answer the question made Ayano cringe as she believed it had something to do with Shido. "Is everything okay at home with Shido?"

Kagami quickly turned her head to Ayano with dread in her eyes. "Ye...yes. Why do you ask?"

Ayano squinted. "I was talking to Shido the other day and I must say that I'm concerned, Kagami. I'm concerned about what you're becoming. I remember the first day you hired me here and I was so excited because you not only helped me out of a tough spot after my breakup, but you were so charismatic and enthusiastic about your firm. Then...Shido came along. That's when everything began to change. Your passion and energy suddenly disappeared shortly after you started dating him and then I started seeing bruises on you."

Kagami winced and began to tremble. Her eyes showed the rising panic in the two trembling pools of color. "I...I don't know what you're talking about."

"It's okay, Kagami. I know. He's hurt you before. He's done bad things to you, hasn't he?" Ayano asked with a very tender voice.

A lump was forming in Kagami's throat and Ayano may have feared that she may be going too far but it needed to be done. Moisture began to thicken in Kagami's eyes as her face began to turn red and Ayano knew she was close to breaking her.

"You're better than this, Kagami. I know that you're scared of leaving him because you're afraid that you'll be alone forever and you'll never be able to have a family like your sisters, but being alone is better than being abused." Ayano continued and slowly walked behind Kagami's chair and gently placed her hands on her shoulders. "I know he's done terrible things to you but that doesn't make you a terrible person. You're one of the greatest humans I've ever known, Kagami, and I know that your heart longs to break free from this prison he has you trapped in. Please, listen to your heart, even if there's another person in this world you love, you must pursue love. Real love. All of this pain and abuse; that's not love, Kagami! No matter who you decide to pursue, you have to make sure that they'll treat you with the respect and admiration that you deserve! You're worth it!"

Kagami couldn't contain it any longer. The dam holding the tears in her eyes shattered and they became two waterfalls and Kagami finally let it out. She had been holding the secrets of abuse behind closed doors for so long that the burden had become too much to bear. Kagami turned and began to

cry into Ayano's torso and her friend embraced her crying head while stroking her hair. Admitting that one was the victim of domestic abuse was a herculean task and it took a lot out of Kagami as she pulled back and wiped her tears.

"I...I don't know where it all went so wrong...! I just wanted to know what being in love felt like...! That's all I wanted! To be loved by someone else in that way! I wanted that for so long and so much that I thought that I would have to bear any burden to make it happen!" Kagami cried. "Now look at me...! That...that...that bastard has made me feel weak and pathetic! He was trying to control me and make me his slave! Why...?! Why didn't I see this a long time ago?! I'm so stupid! The worst!"

Ayano shook her head. "You're not the worst, Kagami. You're the opposite of the worst. You're the strongest woman I've ever known. You believed you needed to bear the bruises he put on you and yet you said nothing. You're so brave, Kagami. And now you're braver for stepping up and admitting it. There is someone else you're in love with...isn't there?"

Kagami dried her tears again and looked into Ayano's with confusion. "How...how did you—"

"It's okay, I know. I've always known. Ever since high school. I always saw the way you looked at her." Ayano said with a loving and accepting smile. "You need to tell her, Kagami. Tell her how you truly feel and do what you need to do. You better hurry up because I think a certain someone is coming back."

Kagami looked up. Her distraught and crying face slowly began to reform and it turned angry. She gritted her teeth with such hostile fury as a piercing glare formed across her face and she quickly stood as she heard a familiar man's voice approach. Ayano couldn't help but smile to herself as she slowly stepped aside and watched the old Kagami return.

Koichi Shido walked with another lawyer back to the office he was trying to pry from Kagami until its door swung open and it shattered one of the office windows when the knob struck it. The noise turned all the heads in the room and everyone gasped when they saw Kagami Hிரagi standing in the open doorway with her hair in an unfamiliar style. They had always seen her with her long hair tied behind her back in one single braid, but this time it was different. Kagami now had her hair divided into two separate pigtails on each side of her head, each one tied with a purple ribbon.

Shido suddenly felt exposed when he saw this new look of anger in Kagami's eyes as she slowly approached him while breathing hard and showing her teeth. "Um..dear, whatever's wrong?"

"You...! You...rat bastard son of a bitch!" Kagami yelled at the top of her lungs as she continued to advance on Shido and the man began to slowly walk backwards as Kagami hastened her approach. Shido lifted his hands up as a shield until Kagami was only inches away from him. "I hired you because I thought you were going to be a worthwhile contribution to my firm! But that was until you showed me your true colors when you put your hands on me! That's right, you're a woman beater, Koichi Shido! You're a scoundrel, living and breathing garbage that I made the mistake of allowing to grace the hallways of my firm! Let me say this for all to hear...you're fired! You're fired! I want you out of my building and out of my life today and that includes my apartment! If I ever see you here or anywhere near my family again, I'll ram my fist into your stomach, rip out your goddamn spine and beat your ass to death with it! Now get out!"

As quickly as Kagami's verbal rampage began, it was over and she left her associates stunned as she stomped out of the building. The entire building was silent and Shido presented a trembling and shocked face. He glared to himself and when all eyes turned to him standing alone, the only noise anyone could hear was the sound of Ayano Minegishi's satisfied giggle.

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The ailing blue-haired woman sat alone in her apartment as night fell upon Tokyo. She sat at her dinner table and stared at the specialty meal that the doctor instructed her to eat as it was one of the only ensembles left that wouldn't jumpstart a vomit episode for her. Raising her fork, Konata poked the oddly colored and shaped food until she managed to slide a small bundle of the food into her mouth. Her tongue was instantly met with bitter tastes and as she struggled to force it down her throat, Konata felt more depressed. Much like her athleticism, Konata took her culinary skills for granted and now missed them dearly. She longed to cook herself one decent meal but nothing she made she could eat anymore.

Once she was able to finish the grotesque meal, Konata had to take another prescription pill as part of her new lifestyle. Every time she swallowed another pill, she felt that another part of her died in her dark and depressed sorrow. Konata took the initiative once again in her solo lifestyle and began to clear the dinner table, the noise of the clamoring dishes and running water in her sink the only source of entertainment.

As she scrubbed her dishes, her brain once again began to replay her kiss with Kagami. She could still taste her, that tender and delicious flavor of the

tsundere's lips. Konata remembered during their high school years when they were the closest and she knew that Kagami was resistive to a lot of things but their kiss was different. Kagami may have resisted a bit, but Konata remembered she used to put up more of a fight over trivial things whether it was going to Comiket or a book store with her. Compared to those other scenarios, Kagami might as well have rolled out the red carpet for Konata to kiss her.

"But...but she didn't admit it..." Konata couldn't help but say out loud as she scrubbed. "But I shouldn't be too upset...I didn't confess to her, either. I wish I could have more time in this life to tell her...or even be with her. I just wish she would see her boyfriend for who he truly is."

As Konata climbed up her stepstool to put a dish away, she heard a knock on her door. The blue-haired woman groaned to herself and thought, Hiyorin, please don't do this to me now. I already told you over the phone that I just need a few personal days. No need to check up on me.

Regardless, Konata turned her sink off and quickly hid her prescription pills in another pantry. When everything in her kitchen was squared away, she approached her apartment door and unlocked it. As she opened it, she expected to see the long-haired Hiyori standing at her doorstep demanding answers as to why Konata had been blowing off work and isolating herself for the entire week.

Anyone could've imagined Konata's surprise when she saw a flashback of high school when Kagami Hiiragi stood in front of her door, her hair reformed into the two pigtails that made her image. The two stared. There was nothing else they could do. Konata didn't expect to see or even hear

from Kagami again for a long time, maybe even indefinitely, but less than twenty-four hours later she was at her front door.

Konata smiled. "You're hair..."

Kagami first replied with another smile. "I know...I know. I was thinking about what you told me last night...about...realizing who I was...and I just wanted to say...I'm sorry. I'm sorry about hitting you."

Konata was hoping for another expression out of Kagami's mouth but either way, she stepped aside and asked, "Would you like to come in?"

Kagami nodded and entered Konata's apartment. It wasn't as luxurious as hers but it was still very spacious and expensive. It had a typical homey feel to it and Kagami quickly took a seat at the empty dinner table as Konata began to prepare tea for them. What surprised Kagami the most was that her apartment wasn't overflowing with paraphernalia from the otaku culture but she knew there must be a special room for it somewhere.

The blue-haired woman returned to the table with two mugs of tea and sat down next to Kagami. "So..."

"...So..." Kagami's nerves replied awkwardly for her.

Konata cleared her throat and said, "I hope there's no hard feelings about... you know. I didn't mean to force myself on you."

Kagami quickly shook her head. "No, Konata, you shouldn't be sorry. I shouldn't have hurt you like I did and I want to thank you for not slamming the door in my face even though I would've deserved that.

"I could never do that to you, Kagami. I always saw you as my best friend and no matter our differences, I would feel empty inside if we weren't friends anymore." Konata replied and took a sip of her tea. "But is there something you want to tell me?"

Kagami gulped and her body began to tremble. "Yes...actually. I had an... interesting...day at work today and I fired Koichi."

Konata's eyes lit up. "Your boyfriend? You fired him?"

Kagami nodded. "And I broke up with him."

Konata's eyes flashed even more life and color.

"I did all of that...because you were right, Konata. I was with Koichi because I felt I needed a man in my life so I could be what society defined as normal." Kagami began her heartfelt revelation as she trembled. "Even in my own profession, there are codes of conduct that aren't as accepting of

certain lifestyles because we're professional representatives for hire for big companies and those companies don't want to be involved with people like me and—"

"I'm sorry to cut you off, Kagami, but when you say people like you, what do you mean?" Konata asked bluntly.

Kagami stiffened like a board and to Konata's surprise, it happened as tears formed in Kagami's eyes and her voice cracked and choked in her deep confession. "I love you, Konata. I'm in love with you. I've loved you for so many years now. Ever since we were in high school, you were my best friend too and I never felt safe with anyone else in this way. You're the only person that I've wanted to be with and I was lying to myself for so many years...please...forgive me, Konata! Please forgive me!"

Watching her friend cover her face with her hands and cry, Konata sprang up from her seat and hugged Kagami as tightly as she could. Konata's eyes followed Kagami's actions and they too flooded as Kagami pulled away from Konata's embrace and looked at Konata.

"Why...why are you crying, too?" Kagami hiccupped while wiping her eyes.

"Be...because I'm so happy, Kagami! When we went our separate ways, it devastated me so much and now...we admit it! We're both so stupid for waiting for so long to tell each other! I love you, too, Kagami! Please stay with me!" Konata felt the tears roll down her face.

Kagami cupped Konata's cheeks in both her hands and used her thumb to wipe away one of the tears. The two stared each other in their soaking eyes and they both acted in sync with each other as their faces neared. Closing their eyes, their two lips connected and they shared their second kiss. It was deeper and more passionate this time. They reveled in this touch and they both made it deeper simultaneously while pulling each other closer and tighter. When their lips disconnected and they stared at each other again in their wet eyes, everything suddenly felt surreal and hazy.

The two loving women found each other in Konata's bed later that night as their night of intimate passion continued. Their act was a beautiful one as the moon's light shined through a window and cast a tender light onto the two women. Everything Kagami thought she knew about physical love was proven wrong by Konata's every soft touch on her body. Up until then the only thing she knew was pain inflicted onto her body but it was different and better now. Her heart still pounding to no end, she let Konata pleasure her as she breathed deeply and trembled. Every time Konata explored a new part of her, she gasped deeply. What quelled her endless shaking was whenever Konata joined hands with her and held tightly, showing they were both scared of these new emotions and physical expressions of their love. Yet when it was Kagami's turn to show her passion for Konata, everything seemed to come natural for her as she touched and played with Konata's body. Everything else before that felt unnatural to Kagami and it further sealed her conviction that she was not in love with men. Only this felt natural.

When the two lovers were exhausted, Kagami rested her body on top of Konata's, a single sweat-soaked bed sheet covering them as they kissed each other tenderly again. When Kagami pulled away from their kiss, she withdrew her face only inches away from Konata's and the two women breathed slowly yet deeply in their exhaustion while holding each other. Each of their long hairstyles meshed with each other, creating a colorful collage of blue and violet on the bed.

Staring into each other's eyes, Kagami saw something about Konata. Kagami ran her soft hand gently across Konata's face and whispered. "You're shaking...are you okay?"

Konata smiled weakly and slowly nodded. "I'm fine. I'm just so happy. I love you, Kagami."

Kagami smiled with her. "I love you, too."

They pulled each other into another soft kiss and when it was complete, Kagami rested her head on Konata's chest as her blue-haired friend continued to breathe deeply and stroke Kagami's head gently. This was true love and true passion as they held each other and eventually fell asleep in each other's arms.

When Kagami awoke two hours later, she looked around her settings and realized she wasn't in her apartment. She was startled at first as she sat up and realized she was naked and held the foreign bed sheet over her chest and then it suddenly clicked. She had a new love in her life and it felt so right. Smiling, Kagami rolled over with the desire to embrace Konata, only to hug an empty spot on the bed.

Kagami looked and saw she was alone in the bed and looked around the empty room. Her tired eyes suddenly spotted a doorway with a light coming out of it. Kagami knew that it was the bathroom and she slowly rested her body back on the bed and waited for Konata to return. She smiled to herself and began to think about what her new life was going to look like with

Konata by her side. The average person would've been terrified beyond comprehension but this new lifestyle felt so right for Kagami that all she could do was smile with confidence.

A few seconds turned into a few minutes until Kagami realized something was different about this situation. The light in the bathroom was still on, yet she didn't hear a single sound coming from inside. Curious by the absence of natural noise, Kagami slid her underwear on and put her wrinkled shirt on and slowly walked over to the door.

She gently knocked and whispered, "Konata? Are you in there?"

No answer.

"I'm going to open the door." Kagami warned and slowly pushed the door open.

The scene inside was so horrendous, Kagami thought she was having a nightmare. The area around the bathroom's toilet was soaked in bloody vomit and the smell Kagami was blasted by nearly triggered her to vomit as well. The toilet's white coating was replaced by drying patches of red liquid and chunks of food, as well as a mixture of blue threads littering the tile floor. The worst part had yet to come. Kagami looked and saw her lover, Konata Izumi, curled around the toilet and unconscious on the floor, her mouth still leaking blood as her body was flushed with red while she continued to sweat. Something was sitting in Konata's one clenched fist but Kagami didn't see it as her emotions exploded.

"Konata! Konata what's wrong?! Wake up, Konata, wake up!" She cried at the top of her lungs and raced in to collect the woman she loved.

When Kagami touched Konata's flesh, she was horrified to feel the petite blue-haired woman's body was burning like a stovetop. Kagami continued to cry Konata's name and yell for her to wake up but Konata's lifeless body remained limp, even when Kagami shook her. Kagami began to cry again as she held Konata close and continued to panic, not knowing why her lover was in this condition. Kagami quickly jumped to her feet and dashed to find the cell phone in her pants pocket to call an ambulance.

The sudden disturbance with Konata's body loosened her clenched fist and allowed a single sheet of toilet paper to slide out. This piece of paper had a message for Kagami. In Konata's last moments, she was able to scribble the only thing she could think of to say to her lover regarding Kagami and the disease that was killing her.

I'm sorry.

CHAPTER 9

Why was this happening? Only several hours ago, Kagami Hiiragi was sharing a deep memory of passion with the one she truly loved and now, she sat as a crying, shaking mess inside a hospital waiting room. She had no idea why Konata suddenly contracted a fever but when the paramedics arrived, they saw it was serious. Her temperature was at forty degrees Celsius and it seemed to be climbing. The only thing the paramedics could

do in the ambulance was apply ice packets over her body in a primitive attempt to stop the spreading fever.

Kagami had been waiting for more than an hour in the waiting room and she looked at her watch, reading five o'clock in the morning. She had work today but was already planning on calling in a vacation day to figure out what was happening with Konata. Feeling a chill of fear run across her body, she hugged herself as tight as she could but it was nothing compared to Konata's touch. All she could see in her mind was the horrifying scene when Kagami found Konata in the bathroom and curled around the toilet. She couldn't help but feel that some divine spirit was punishing her for getting rid of the man in her life for another woman. This feeling only made her sick to her stomach.

When movement caught the corner of Kagami's eyes, she glanced and saw a doctor exit from an operating room with news for her. She slowly stood and approached, fearing the worst.

"Are you the...partner...of Izumi-san?" The doctor asked.

Kagami nodded and tried to reply without sounding so scared. "Yes, please tell me. Is she okay?"

"Yes, she's fine." The doctor quickly replied as he knew this news was the most important to Kagami.

She bluntly sighed in relief and added, "What happened to her?"

"I don't know how much you know, but Izumi-san was diagnosed with a genetic disease about a week ago that she inherited from her deceased mother. We don't know much about it, except that it's something in the brain that makes the entire body go haywire until it finally shuts down. She's been on a series of medications and specialty food but the disease is still mutating and it sent her hypothalamus into shockwaves which caused her fever." The doctor informed her. "We were able to stop the fever from getting worse and we're doing the best we can to return her to her normal body temperature so we should count ourselves lucky. It's a good thing you found her when you did because even just half an hour later there wouldn't have been anything we could've done. She's stable for now."

Kagami nodded and puckered her face while doing the best she could to hold the tears in. "Is...is she going to...die?"

The doctor nodded with remorse. "Yes, ma'am. I'm sorry, I thought she would've told you. She's awake now if you want to speak to her."

A new and angry glare formed on Kagami's face. "Yes...yes I would like to speak to her."

Leading her through the hospital, the doctor allowed Kagami to follow him until they reached a corridor of personal rooms for patients. When Kagami entered one of the rooms, she saw her beloved blue-haired partner resting in a bed with tubes and needles attached to each of her arms. A blue cooling pouch was also wrapped around her forehead to keep combating the fever and when Konata's green eyes looked into Kagami's glare, she quickly averted her stare.

Kagami didn't say a word. She simply walked in and took a seat next to Konata's bed and stared at her with angry yet silent eyes. Konata continued to look away and there was silence between the two once again, though this time for completely different reasons. The digital beeps of the medical machinery brought back horrid memories for Kagami when her sister was on her downward spiral and she had to admit that she was getting very sick of this routine. All the people she cared about the most were ending up in hospitals and it kept angering her.

"I guess you're wondering about why we're here." Konata finally stated. "I guess you're also wondering why I didn't tell you about...this condition I have."

Silence was Kagami's only response.

"I know you must be mad but I think that if you—"

"Shut up!" Kagami finally shrieked, making Konata jump slightly in her bed. "You just shut up for a second!"

More silence fell between them for a few more second until Kagami continued. "What makes you think you have the right to keep something like this from me?"

Konata looked at Kagami when her voice tightened towards the end and saw Kagami was on the verge of crying. "Kagami, I just—"

"I'm not done!" Kagami yelled again and released her tears. "I gave myself to you, Konata. I opened my heart to you and I trusted you. I can't help but feel betrayed by you in lieu of this. Why wouldn't you tell me about something this big?! Did you think I wouldn't be able to handle it?! Answer me! Why did you practically lie to me?!"

Konata took a deep breath and exhaled. "I just...didn't want to hurt you, Kagami."

"And you thought me finding your burning body covered in blood and vomit didn't hurt me?!" Kagami rightfully retorted angrily as she hiccupped and wiped more tears away. "You have no right! You have no right to keep something like that from me, Konata! I love you more than you could ever know and you thought that hiding something like this from me is respecting my love for you?!"

"I just wanted to live out the rest of my days with you, Kagami." Konata replied. "All I wanted was a normal life with you and for none of us to feel this anguish."

"But I would've felt it anyway, goddamn it!" Kagami yelled, becoming more frustrated with Konata's decisions as she continued to cry relentlessly. "Why would you do that to me?! When we made love, I felt nothing but happiness and I was planning to spend the rest of my days with you, too! Why would you keep something like this to yourself and let me find out

when you died and thus take all of my happiness away?! How could you be so selfish?! What is it, do you not respect me enough to tell me as the person you love?!"

Konata shook her head and she too felt her eyes flood. "It's not like that! I just wanted to spare your feelings!"

Kagami rubbed her eyes in futile attempts to dry them. She sniffed several times and choked a bit before she could form a clear response. "Spare my feelings?! In something this big, I want my feelings to be hurt! I want to feel all the pain you feel! I want to be as scared as you are! I love you, Konata, and every blow inflicted onto you is inflicted onto me as well! You can't isolate yourself from me like this! We're not friends anymore, Konata! We're more than that now! Much more! Every time you're hurt, I'll be hurt and vice-versa! If you die, I'll be dead on the inside! How long?!"

Konata was reluctant to answer but concluded Kagami was right. Keeping that information from Kagami showed a lack of respect for her and they were more than just friends now. They were something much more and Konata's personal life was now Kagami's personal life as well. Either way, that wasn't going to soften the blow for the couple when Konata answered.

"Less than two months." Konata replied and braced for another storm.

Kagami quickly collapsed her upper body onto Konata's bed, took the blue-haired woman's hand and held it close and cried harder. Kagami's cries echoed in the room as she cried over Konata's soft hand and Konata released her tears. She shifted her body closer to Kagami and with her free

hand, Konata gently took hold of Kagami's shirt and began to pull her closer.

Kagami felt what her lover was trying to do and she assisted by crawling onto the hospital bed and hugged Konata tightly. She continued to cry loudly and Konata allowed her emotions to copy the woman she loved too and her tears flowed freely down her face.

"I...I don't want to die, Kagami..." Konata's weak and frail voice announced and she sounded like a scared child as she said it through her tears. "I'm so scared..."

Hearing Konata's simple request only made Kagami cry harder, as it did with Konata. This isn't how it was supposed to happen. Kagami had just realized the true strength within herself and was able to beat out the abuser in her life and finally be with the person she loved for so long. She even had a lifestyle planned for herself and Konata in her mind and everything. Now, less than a day after admitting it and being with her, Kagami was going to lose the love of her life forever. It was so unfair.

The hospital room doors opened and the doctor walked in to the emotionally devastating sight. Seeing Kagami and Konata holding each other and crying into each other's bodies made him feel a lump in his throat as this part of his job never got any easier. This wasn't the first death sentence he was dealing with but he could always sympathize with each of the patience and their loved ones in their final days.

He cleared his throat and said, "I'm sorry to break this up, but Izumi-san needs to have a few standard procedures done to stabilize the rest of her bodily functions. I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to wait outside, Hiiragi-san."

Kagami reluctantly disconnected herself from Konata and dried her soaking eyes. She squeezed Konata's hand one more time and began to walk out of the hospital room while continuing to sniff.

"Kagami...I'm sorry...for not telling you." Konata squeaked as the doctor moved in with his equipment to help get the dying woman as stable as possible.

Kagami slowly nodded while keeping her back facing Konata and finally left the room. When she felt the door close behind her, she once again began to cry as she walked back to the waiting room feeling broken and defeated after winning her life back. Sitting back in another chair, she suddenly felt her cell phone vibrate in her pocket and she pulled it out and saw she had a new text message from her sister, Inori.

She opened the message and it stated, Heard you had a strange day at work. Can we talk?

Kagami gulped and knew what was waiting for her if she called her oldest sister. She was going to get both a congratulations for breaking it off with Shido and a lecture for isolating herself from her family. This put more pressure on Kagami because her family didn't know about her newfound love life and she wondered how she would tell them. One issue that she

cared about more than anything was how it would affect her niece and nephew, Aito and Kiyora. They were still at an age where they barely knew where babies came from let alone being at an age to comprehend mainstream adult relationships between a man and a woman. What would they think when they found out that their Aunt Kagami was in to other women?

Kagami physically shook her head and disregarded such thoughts as she believed she had a serious matter at hand to address. Her lover was dying before her eyes after she just got her and she wondered what she could do. The doctors said that this disease was in Konata's brain and sending distressed signals to all parts of her body, triggering fevers, upset stomachs, her hair loss, and other issues. Kagami however couldn't accept the fact that there was no cure and she searched her own intuition for any resource to bring to the table. Her brain finally thought of one but it would be considered the "Hail Mary" of all attempts to save Konata.

She looked at her watch and tried to calculate the time zone difference and concluded it was okay to call. Kagami found this person's number in her phone and called.

Waiting for the dial tones to end, Kagami felt her knees go weak when she heard this person's voice on the other end and she began to talk. "Hey there...yeah it's me. Yes, I know it has been awhile. I wish I could say that I was doing fine but I'm afraid I'm calling you on bad circumstances." Kagami's voice tightened as more emotions began to spew. "Konata's sick...and the doctors are saying...less than two months to live. Please, I know you've always been there for us back in the old days but I need you now more than ever. Please tell me you'll come. Please come and try and help us. You know I would never ask this of you if I wasn't desperate...but I am desperate. Konata means something...very special to me now. I don't

want to lose her like this. Not like this. Please, I beg of you...will you come?"

Kagami listened deeply to the other person's response. It was long and it detailed what the next series of events for this person was going to look like but this new person was already diving headfirst into this new situation. When the person Kagami was talking to finished their series of responses, Kagami couldn't contain her poker face anymore in the hospital waiting room. Her flaring emotions showed what the other person was telling her as she smiled and closed her eyes, triggering more tears to fall. She slowly nodded in her crying state until she replied.

"Thank you. Thank you...so much." She said and hung up her phone.

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Later that day, it was Konata's turn to be mad at Kagami. The doctors were able to stabilize Konata's vitals but they insisted that she stay at the hospital in case her fever returned or if something else happened. Konata wouldn't hear any of it and didn't stop her tantrums until she was deemed stable enough by the hospital staff to be discharged. However, it wasn't Kagami's objection to Konata leaving the hospital that sparked another fight; it was when Konata found out that the woman she loved and bedded the previous night also called her cousin, Yui Narumi, and told her about the blue-hair's situation. Even though Konata knew it was wrong to hide her disease from Kagami, she still didn't want any more attention regarding it but that wish would be in vain.

If anyone thought that Yui's old ways of bursting into a room with vibrant energy was a sight, they should've been there when she arrived at the hospital. Practically knocking the door off its hinges, she stormed into Konata's room as her blue-haired cousin sat in a wheelchair and getting ready to leave the building.

"Konata! Why wouldn't you tell us something like this?!" Yui exclaimed angrily.

"I thought you'd be sad, not pissed off." Konata huffed and turned her head away, trying to dismiss the new shows of concern.

"I cried plenty on my way here but I was hoping you could set me straight about something! As I sped here and plowed through I don't know how many red lights, I had no idea what I was crying for!" Yui gasped for air. "I don't know if I was crying because the cousin I practically raised is dying or if I cried because the cousin I practically raised who's dying didn't think either me, Yutaka, or her own father was important enough to tell them about this!"

Konata continued to look the other way, refusing to admit that her judgment was having severe ramifications. "I'm sorry, okay?! I'm sorry I didn't know how to handle this news when my doctor first told me, I'm sorry I feel like shit day in and day out, and most of all I'm sorry that I didn't know how to break this kind of shit to the people I love the most because I know how much it would gut them!"

Despite Konata's strong words, Yui was still enraged and quickly rushed over to her petite cousin who still refused to look her in the eyes, even when she shouted the reasons why she didn't tell her. Yui grabbed Konata by the shoulders and before Yui could continue her verbal onslaught, Konata quickly snapped her head towards her cousin with an angry, tear-soaked frown on her face.

As Yui opened her mouth to shout, she saw Konata's sudden head movement did something that made her heart skip a beat. A handful of Konata's luscious blue hair went flying and drifted in the air until it fell to the floor. Yui and Konata watched it from beginning to end and seeing the sight brought more uncomfortable silence between them. Two water drops fell from Konata's eyes as she stared at her depleted hair follicles on the white tile floor as she sniffed again and Konata slowly turned her head back and looked Yui in the eyes, her once picturesque pools of green now pits of burning red in the massive amounts of water flooding them.

All of Yui's anger disappeared when she saw the look of pure devastation in her eyes. It couldn't be helped because of the emotional bond these two family members shared. Yui remembered coming by and visiting Konata every night for many years when she was a middle school student to help her uncle raise her. Yui grew a deep bond with Konata that was never severed but now, it seemed that fate was going to sever it for them.

Her eyes flooding again, all Yui could do was pull Konata close and hug her as tight as she could while she cried silently. Konata's trembling arms slowly rose from the armrests of her wheelchair and embraced Yui. The blue-haired woman cried on her older cousin's shoulder and whispered, "Why me, Yui? Why me?"

Yui tightened her hug around Konata and sniffed bluntly while shaking her head. "I don't know, Konata. I wish I knew. You know that if I could I would switch places with you without a second thought, right?"

Konata hesitated, not because she doubted Yui's words, but because she shuddered about how she would feel if she and Yui would switch places with her. Either way, Konata would be devastated. This was just simply a shit deal for everyone. Nevertheless, she slowly nodded and tightened her grip on her older cousin.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" Yui asked lovingly.

"Just...just tell Yutaka for me. You'll be able to break the news easier than I would. I'll call my dad, too." Konata replied and as the two broke their hug, the hospital door opened and Kagami slowly walked in.

When Konata and Kagami looked at each other, Konata couldn't help but feel a wave of relief and felt a sense of safety engulf her as she saw her twin-tailed partner approach. "Yui, there's something else you should know." Konata added.

Yui gulped, expecting more medical drama. She didn't expect Kagami to approach Konata from behind and when she stood behind her wheelchair, Konata raised her head and puckered her lips. It caught Yui by surprise to see Kagami close her eyes, lean down, and connect her lips with her cousin's earning a large and confused expression from Yui's stunned face.

When their kiss was complete, Konata looked forward with a clearly more relaxed face and said, "At least I won't have to die alone."

Kagami softly gripped Konata's shoulders and began to wheel her out of the room. Kagami however still held her humble personality close and turned to Yui to say, "Sorry you had to find out this way. It...sort of came as a shock for me, too, if that's any conciliation."

Yui had a clear look of concern on her face, not out of disgust, but more so out of shock. This was the little cousin she remembered holding in her arms when she was barely out of diapers and now she was in a relationship with another woman. She always knew Konata was rambunctious and flamboyant, but she never thought she'd live to see the day where Konata would actually admit that she likes other women that way. Yui's senses returned when she remembered that Konata had a huge cross to bear and that it wasn't her place to judge the last Earthly thing that was clearly making her happy for the little time she had left. Yui simply sighed and smiled at Kagami, who smiled back and they began to escort Konata out of the hospital.

Kagami pushed Konata out of the hospital by the wheelchair and when they were able to reassure Yui that they had it under control, Yui returned to her car. Her car bore several dents and scratches on both sides; souvenirs her car acquired on the way to the hospital. She sat in her car alone and watched her cousin get into Kagami's car and the two began to leave the parking lot together.

She sighed again at this morbid situation her family was dealt and reached for her cell phone. Calling a number, she waited for the dial tone to end until she heard the sweet chime of her little sister's voice.

"Hey Yutaka, it's me. Listen...I'm afraid I've got some bad news for you. You might want to come home as quickly as possible." Yui said with remorse.

As Kagami continued to drive, the two remained silent during the ride. Kagami was still disappointed that Konata didn't tell her about her impending demise and the cause of it, but she knew staying mad at her would be wasted energy. Energy the two lovers could be spending expressing to each other in emotional and physical ways.

While continuing to drive, Kagami's eyes spotted a familiar spot that suddenly meant a lot to the couple. She looked at the same outdoor café where they were reunited a few days earlier and to Konata's surprise, she pulled into the restaurant's parking lot. When she parked the car, she simply said, "We need to talk."

Kagami quickly dashed to her car's passenger side door with the intention of helping her lover out, which was instantly met with sour results. Konata swatted at Kagami's outstretched hands with a clear temper and she struggled to pull her petite body out of the car. When she was able to stand on her two feet, Konata continued to resist Kagami's constant attempts at helping her to a seat, which the blue-haired woman fought every step of the way. Kagami wouldn't leave Konata alone until they finally reached a table and two chairs and sat down.

"So what is it now?" Konata asked with mounting frustration. "I said I was sorry already and you're right; you do have the right to know everything that's happening in my personal life because we're together now. If you're

worried about catching something from me when we did it last night, you don't have to worry. It's not that kind of disease so whatever it is you have to say, Kagami, just get it over with."

Silence was not only Kagami's response, it was also her weapon. She allowed the pause between them to carry on until she saw Konata was nice and confused regarding why they were there and she quietly asked, "Are you finished?"

Konata lowered her head and slowly nodded. "Yeah, I'm finished."

"Good. Now that that's settled, I just want you to know a few things." Kagami said softly and placed her outstretched hands on the table and was pleased to watch Konata react positively by connecting her hands with hers as Kagami continued. "First off, I want you to know that I'm not going anywhere. I'm not going to abandon you in these days ahead and I promise you I will stay by your side until the very end. Second, I have already accepted you for who you are and I expect you to do the same for me no matter how strange you may find it. If we want any chance of this relationship working out, we need to keep meeting each other halfway and you need to understand that I have other priorities, too. I have a family back in Saitama who I've been keeping in the dark for so long and now I need to reconnect with them, especially my niece and nephews."

Konata was confused to why Kagami was talking this way. "You're talking as if we'll be together forever. I wish that would be true, but unfortunately, that's not how this story is going to end."

"Don't talk like that, Konata. I'm working on something for you and I've called in some serious backup to try and fix you." Kagami quickly replied and tightened her grip on Konata's hands.

It started to make sense for the blue-haired woman. It seemed to her that Kagami was trying to slip into a fantasy world and convince herself that everything was going to be okay. Konata didn't know what her lover meant by calling in backup but she barely processed it as the message went in one ear and out the other.

"Oh Kagami..." was the only response Konata could muster.

Kagami's face tightened and she scooted her chair over to sit side-by-side with Konata and she wrapped her arm around her slim shoulder and pulled her close. "Konata...please don't. Don't give up on me. Don't put yourself in your own grave."

Konata still kept close to the woman she loved but couldn't help but look away. "I understand why you feel the way you do and why you're saying what you are, but Kagami, you must understand that I'm not long for this world. But I hope you know how happy you made me after you came to me last night. That was the last night I felt alone. You saved me from always going to bed lonely and cold and now...with you by my side...I think I can go in peace."

Hearing Konata speak this way only made Kagami's eyes flood once again and she held Konata tighter. She rested her head on the top of Konata's head until the blue-haired slowly turned and looked up to Kagami sitting next to

her. Nothing had to be said between the two of them as they closed their eyes and kissed each other again.

Kagami took Konata to her apartment later that night after they went back to pick up all of Konata's medication. Kagami had to admit that she was nervous at first when she opened the door to her apartment. Not because Kagami was about to spend another night with Konata, but she wondered if her words against her ex-boyfriend had sank in and she hoped he and all his stuff was gone. Walking into her apartment, she quickly looked around and waves of relief swept Kagami when she looked through every room and saw every trace of Shido was gone. All of his clothes, pictures, personal belongings, everything was gone. Kagami exhaled deeply and happily.

Despite the drama of today at the hospital, Kagami admitted that she still wouldn't trade any of the time she spent with Konata for anything. She was in love with her and it was the same for Konata. They knew that Konata's clock was still ticking but they tried their hardest not to think of that. They only focused on the time they had left with each other and tried to make up for so much lost time.

Konata cooked dinner for Kagami and the two shared the meal together as a couple. They watched a movie together while holding each other and were able to share a few laughs and crying moments in the film. They took a bath together and continued to hold each other closely in the large tub without saying a word. Konata rested herself curled onto Kagami's chest as Kagami stroked her back slowly.

Resting in the bed that used to be a slab of torture for Kagami, it became what it was always meant to be; a place of warmth and sanctuary. Covered by the bed's sheets, Konata took the initiative and pulled Kagami close as

their make out session continued. Still getting used to these new expressions of love, Kagami gasped and trembled when she felt Konata unbutton her pajama top and massage her chest.

When their act was over, they held each other again, Kagami staying extra vigilant and hell-bent on making sure there wouldn't be a repeat of last night in the bathroom. While they spooned, Kagami gently ran her fingers across Konata's hand that was attached to hers and Kagami gently kissed the back of Konata's head. She watched her lover sleep soundly and reveled in the peace they were sharing. Kagami soon felt her eyelids become heavy and concluded Konata was safe for the night and rested her head on her pillow. Sleep soon consumed her and there was peace.

If they could look into the future and see what the next day had in store for them, they would've made their peaceful moment last longer. This was the last night of peace Kagami and Konata would ever know in their lives as a storm rolled in.

CHAPTER 10

It started out as a beautiful spring morning. The sun slowly rose above Saitama while birds chirped lively to greet the morning orb of orange in the sky as its light awoke the stunning green landscape around the Hiiragi family shrine. It had drizzled a bit the previous night so water droplets slowly dripped off the cherry blossom trees while also acting as prisms for the sun, creating more lushes colors.

Slowly stirring from his sleep, Aito Shiraishi gradually opened his eyes and leisurely sat up from his bed. He stretched, yawned, and looked down at the smaller person occupying his bed with him. Kiyora continued to sleep with her arms wrapped around the teddy bear that never seemed to leave her side. He smiled at his little sister and gently rubbed her head but also wanted to try and test his sister again for amusement. Aito slowly moved his hand towards the teddy bear and tried to pull it from his sister's grasp, triggering Kiyora to quickly pull the bear tighter to her body, making Aito giggle.

The stuffed animal meant a lot to her as it was sent to her from France when her mother was in Paris for another fashion show. Tsukasa bought the doll for her and to make it extra special for Kiyora, she sprayed just a bit of her perfume onto it so it would always smell like her. It made Kiyora feel more relaxed and whenever she could smell the perfume, it made her mother seem closer to her. Kiyora was still very shy and was only a ball of fire when her mother was around.

Aito looked around his grandparents' house and remembered spending the night with his sister to give his father some downtime. Having Tsukasa working on the other side of the globe continued to put strains on their marriage but it was the fact that their children continued to prosper in their childhoods that reassured them that they were doing a good job as parents. However, they still counted down the days until Tsukasa would come home after the season for her was over, which fortunately was right around the corner.

The young boy stretched his tired limbs and crawled out of his bed when he heard the sounds of activity coming from the kitchen and he slowly walked towards the room. Walking through the hallway, he entered the kitchen and saw his grandmother Miki Hiiragi wearing her morning apron and beginning to cook breakfast until his footsteps made his presence known.

"Oh, good morning, Aito-chan. Did you sleep well?" Miki asked lovingly when she turned and saw her grandson sit at the table.

"Yes, grandma. Is dad still picking us up later today?" Aito asked with a yawn.

Miki couldn't help but have fun with her grandson as she grinned. "Yes he is. Why, don't you like spending time with your grandmother?"

Aito instantly went on the defensive. "Wait, it's not that! I didn't mean it like that, really, grandma! I love you!"

Miki giggled at her grandson's flamboyant reaction and quickly turned with a plateful of pancakes. "I'm just kidding, dear. Now eat up, you're a growing boy after all."

Aito happily complied and began to devour the pancakes as Miki scooped them onto his plate. As he ate, Kiyora slowly stumbled into the kitchen while rubbing her eyes and yawning with her free hand while still holding the teddy bear with the other. She too climbed onto another chair next to her brother.

"Good morning," she whispered.

"Good morning, Kiyora-chan. Would you like some breakfast?" Miki asked as she continued to work over her stove.

She nodded happily.

As they continued to eat, a knock was heard at their front door and Miki excused herself from the table to answer it. She took off her apron and hung it on a pantry knob near the coffeemaker and proceeded to the foyer. While the children ate, they heard their grandmother open the door and her voice that followed by saying, "Koichi...good morning."

Hearing the name perked up Aito's ears and he quickly left his chair to greet the man. He dashed into the foyer and saw the tall man dressed in black standing in the doorway with Miki in front of him and he hugged his legs.

"Good to see you, Shido-sama!" Aito exclaimed. "Did you come to play?!"

Shido laughed and bent down to the boy and patted his head. "Good to see you, too, Aito-chan. Listen, I was hoping I could talk to your grandmother for a moment and then we'll play. How's that sound?"

Aito nodded happily and left the two adults to talk as Miki allowed Shido to enter the sanctity of her home. "So what can I do for you, Koichi? I didn't expect to see you so early. Would you like some coffee or breakfast?"

"A cup of coffee would be nice." Shido quickly responded Miki quickly retrieved him a cup from the kitchen as he took it and swallowed a sip. "I won't be staying for long because I'm afraid I have some bad news for you."

Miki quickly looked up with a concerned expression.

"Kagami says she's leaving me." Shido replied.

The Hiiragi housewife gasped and placed her hands over her mouth. "Oh dear. Koichi I am so sorry. What happened?"

Shido shook his head. "I wish I could tell you, Miki. Kagami came home late the other night and said she wanted me out. To be honest...I think she found another love."

With her hands still covering her mouth, Miki shook her head. "That...that cannot be. That's not like Kagami to just find another man."

Shido raised his eyebrows and put on another act while slowly shaking his head. "Well, Miki, I don't know exactly how to say this...but...well...no, I don't think it's my place to say."

Miki placed her hands on Shido's hands and held them. "Koichi, even though you and my daughter haven't...formally established yourselves as a legitimate couple...I still consider you to be family. You're like the son I

never had and the children love you dearly. I want you to see my family as your family and for this to be a place where you can tell us anything. So please, don't suffer in silence. Tell me, what's going on?"

Keeping his award winning act going, Shido sighed and was even able to form a tear in his eye and replied, "Well, I believe I know who Kagami has been seeing...and it's not a man. I believe her name is...Konata Izumi."

Shido had known Miki for a long time and he had never seen her form a face like the one she created when he told her about her daughter's new found love. She stuttered initially until she replied, "Kon...Kon...Konata... Izumi...? The blue-hair?"

Shido nodded. "First off, you should know that even if it's true...Kagami will always be your daughter. You should always remember that and you should be very proud of her and what she has been able to accomplish. What hurts the most though is that she doesn't want me around you or your family anymore either so I just came to say goodbye."

Shaking her head again, Miki began to object. "But...but the children..."

Shido nodded. "I know, I know. I'll miss them too but I must respect Kagami's wishes. Now...I think I would like to take Aito and Kiyora for one last walk, if that's okay."

Miki nodded slowly with a confused face. It was still breakfast time and already her day was shaping up to be a strange one with Shido leaving and

now the idea that her own daughter may be a lesbian. The woman trembled as Shido stood while finishing his coffee and walked into the kitchen, seeing the two children talking to each other. When they saw him, their faces lit up.

"How about we take a walk together?" Shido asked lovingly.

"Yeah!" Aito and Kiyora exclaimed.

Shido smiled and nodded. "Go put some comfortable shoes on and we'll go."

The two children raced each other down the hallway laughing the whole way and Shido looked around. He was alone in the kitchen and he smiled an evil grin as he reached into his jacket pocket and slowly retracted a small glass vile filled with a clear liquid. He unscrewed the lid and eyed the coffeepot filled with the black liquid steaming in it and he looked around one more time to make sure he was alone. Deepening his smile, he opened the coffeepot and quickly poured every last bit of the liquid into the dark drink and it disappeared. Putting the coffeepot back, he screwed the glass vile lid back on and looked around until he spotted what he was looking for. Seeing Miki's apron hanging from a pantry knob, he quickly dropped the empty vile in the front pocket and turned away just as the children returned.

He took their hands and led them out of the house and towards the family shrine. As the two children bounced up and down happily, Shido continued to play along with them until he looked forward and saw an older man walking towards them from the shrine. He squinted when he saw Tadao

Hiragi returning from talking with Matsuri at the shrine's grounds on the work that needed to be done.

When the older man spotted the devil in black walking with his two grandchildren, he wanted to say something but wanted to preserve their innocence. He didn't want them to know about what kind of man Shido was underneath so he said nothing and continued to walk silently towards them back to his house. Tadao and Shido barely exchanged glances with each other as they passed each other but it was when Shido opened his mouth and said words that prompted Tadao to stop.

"It's been nice knowing you, sir." He quickly whispered.

Tadao turned and looked down and was relieved to see his grandchildren didn't hear his sentence and were still looking forward to spending time with Shido. The three people continued to walk towards the shrine and Tadao didn't know what to make of Shido's quick sentence. For some reason, he suddenly felt an icy chill run down his spine when he heard the lawyer's words and turned again. Walking back to his home, he found his wife stuck in a trance in their living room.

"Why is Shido here?" He bluntly asked, barely noticing something about Kagami was bothering Miki.

Miki shook her head, thinking that Shido was overreacting or misunderstood something and disregarded his theory. Miki knew her daughter and knew that even though she was a bit stubborn and even

masculine at time, she honestly couldn't picture Kagami with another woman no matter how secular her education and life experiences made her.

Clearing her throat, Miki stood and said, "Koichi says that Kagami is breaking up with him."

This news caught Tadao by surprise as he slowly walked to the kitchen. Shido's earlier sentence suddenly made sense. "B...breaking up with him? When did this happen?"

"Uh...recently apparently." Miki replied with confusion as she followed him into the kitchen and she saw her husband take the coffeepot and pour himself a mug. He also poured his wife one and the two sat at the table while continuing the conversation.

"I think that's for the best. There's something about Shido that...I don't know how to put it, but he makes me feel uneasy." Tadao said and held his mug of steaming coffee. "I get bad vibes from him and I don't think he's the kind of man that Kagami needs in her life, especially because I think he's one of those men that's only motivated by money and power."

"Oh hush, Tadao." Miki replied and inched her coffee cup closer to her lips. "You're just over analyzing everything. Koichi is a good man."

Miki's lips touched the coffee cup and she could feel the hot liquid approach her open mouth. The phone suddenly rang and Miki took the cup away

from her lips and sat it back down on the table while saying, "I'll get it. It's probably Minoru."

Tadao watched his wife walk to the phone hanging on the wall as he looked down at his steaming coffee. He lifted it up and swallowed a large gulp of it to speed up its caffeinated power.

"Hello? Oh good morning, Minoru." Miki said happily and waited for her son-in-law to finish talking. "Sure, we can keep the kids for an extra hour. Don't worry it's not an inconvenience at all. Okay, we'll see you at three o'clock. Okay, sounds like a plan, goodbye."

Miki turned back and sat down with her husband.

"Good coffee, dear." Tadao said with a smile, earning another smile from his loving wife.

Shido watched Aito and Kiyora throw a few breadcrumbs to some of the birds hopping on the ground below the trees looking for food. The children were having fun with their older friend but as Shido watched them with tender yet fake eyes, he heard another person approach from his left and he turned, seeing Matsuri walk towards him in her Miko outfit.

Seeing that the children were distracted, he stood and walked towards Matsuri as he had a pretty good idea what this was about. His intuition proved true when her face formed a glare and she said, "Kagami was talking to Inori last night. She says she broke it off with you."

Shido nodded while keeping a placid face.

"Then I have to ask; why are you here?" She asked, clearly agitated but keeping her religious tolerance showing.

"I just wanted to say goodbye to the children. That's all. I'm sure you hate me, Matsuri, but you have to admit that I love these kids and they love me, too. Correct?" He replied.

Matsuri looked away and it pained her to admit it, but he was right. The kids did love him but she was still oblivious to his sinister plot in using them as pawns to take Kagami down. Regardless, Matsuri slowly nodded without looking him in the eyes.

Shido huffed. "But I'm sure you're also wondering what it was like between Kagami and I behind closed doors. I slapped and beat her around a few times to keep her under control and under my influence."

Matsuri's eyes exploded with emotions and her face showed a fierce and violent temper was brewing after finding out this man was abusing her little sister. She looked at him with a stare so angry yet he held a satisfied grin on his face because he knew Matsuri wanted to attack him in the worst way. Matsuri wasn't stupid and she glanced behind Shido and saw her niece and nephew still feeding the birds and having a good time. He told her this just to mock her knowing that she couldn't rear her aggressive side around the children.

"You truly are a monster, Shido." Matsuri hissed under her breath but loud enough for him to hear as she formed sweat around her head. "You're using my own niece's and nephew's innocence against me because you know I would make you my bitch if they weren't here. You're a pig. A heathen."

Shido deepened his smile while keeping his eyes narrowed. "Sticks and stones, Matsuri. Before I go, I just want you to know that your sister isn't as tough as you. She talks and walks tough but once I get her pinned on the bed, she always becomes my bitch. Oh the noises I can make her make and how she moans when I stick it to her."

Seeing the middle Hiiragi daughter grit her teeth and form fists so tight it made her bones crack amused Shido as he looked into the swirling pools of hate in her eyes. "Leave. Leave my family's property now."

Keeping his smile, Shido slowly turned and walked back towards the kids as Matsuri watched his every move carefully. He bent down to the kids, grabbing their attention, and said, "Sorry I have to say this, but I have to go to work now. I have a good feeling I'll be getting a promotion today."

The kids were clearly disappointed that he had to go but knew the importance of his work and they hugged him one final time. As Matsuri watched the despicable man hug her youngest family members, he saw him move his head closer to their ears and watched his jaw move quickly. Aito and Kiyora suddenly presented new faces when he finished whispering to them as he pulled away and stood. They were looks of deep confusion, the kind that a child would give when they would hear or see something that

they would be unable to comprehend at such a young age. Matsuri saw this and tightened her glare as the man began to walk away from them.

When he was gone, the children still held their looks of confusion as Matsuri walked over and bent down to them. "Kids, what did he tell you?"

They looked at each other in confusion and were hesitant to tell her, making Matsuri nervous and angry over what he said.

"Aito, Kiyora, it's okay. You can tell me what he said. It might be important for me to hear and—"

Matsuri was cut off by a noise so horrid that it echoed across the Hiiragi property and pierced her eardrums. Her heart went into hyper-drive when she figured out it was her mother screaming from their house. Something had happened and she quickly stood and ordered the kids to stay at the shrine and for Aito to watch over his sister. Matsuri ran as fast as she could, her heart pounding and her nerves shaking, back to their family home as her mother continued to scream Tadao's name over and over.

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The elevator dinged and the large doors opened, allowing Kagami Hiiragi to exit at her firm. She was ready to tackle another day but already had a feeling that this one was going to be a difficult one. She had already missed a few days of work and felt that her verbal attack on Shido two days ago was going to come back to haunt her. More than anything she knew she was

going to have a lot of explaining to do. She could instantly feel her associates' eyes on her as she walked quickly to her office.

Ayano Minegishi was already stressing out at her desk as she talked on her phone and desperately tried to keep up writing a message for Kagami. She was talking to a high-ranking lawyer in Tokyo and a vital member to the Japanese Federation of Bar Associations and he was furious with Kagami. Ayano reassured him that Kagami would get back to him at her earliest convenience and to not worry.

When Ayano was finally able to hang up the phone, she collapsed into her chair and took a deep breath as Kagami rounded the corner, grabbing the secretary's attention. "Kagami, thank the gods you're here. Listen, we've got problems."

Kagami sighed. "What now?"

"I just got off the phone with the JFBA and they're pissed to no end. The people in your firm are becoming impatient with your recent absences and I think you might have poked a massive beehive when you fired Shido."

Kagami squinted at her. "I was only following your advice."

"I know, I know, but I think we might be in over our heads with this." Ayano said, her panic rising. "Ever since you fired Shido, nearly every law firm in Tokyo has been calling and wondering why. You telling everyone that he's a woman beater is the biggest question."

Kagami saw Ayano's fear and knew something big was happening and she looked around, seeing more of her associates quickly look away as soon as they locked eyes. When they looked away, the associates began to whisper to each other and Kagami knew they needed privacy. Guiding Ayano into her office, Kagami shut the door behind her.

"Okay, tell me, what exactly is going on now?" Kagami asked.

Ayano took another deep breath to try and relax herself until she continued. "Okay, when you fired Shido, it seems that nobody in this firm or any other firm for that matter was very pleased with that decision. Everyone is beginning to question your leadership, Kagami, and I even heard rumors in the hallway that they're threatening to initiate the Safety Clause of your firm's charter. The one you wrote."

Kagami's heart skipped a beat when she heard this. Hearing the name Safety Clause brought her back several years when she first started her firm and began to hire fellow attorneys to work for her. To gather more support and to show her confidence in herself and her abilities, she added a protocol to her firm's charter that would allow it to keep running in the event she would be unable to do so whether by design or circumstances. It would be a simple popularity vote amongst her associates on the high-ranking partners picked by Kagami who she saw as the most qualified. Regrettably, Shido was at the top of the list. She had weathered herself and her firm through some pretty tough times, but even the threat of the Safety Clause never came up. Kagami was now scared and began to wonder if she had walked herself into a trap laid by Shido.

Kagami's cell phone began ringing and she looked at the screen, seeing it was Matsuri calling her. She didn't know why she was calling but Kagami instantly thought that it wasn't important so she ignored the call.

"Okay, so the associates are threatening to initiate the Safety Clause and conduct a Vote of No Confidence." Kagami restated the situation. "Okay, that's fine. All I have to do is make my case and tell them that Shido has been an abusive man and now that he's gone, I'll be able to get my head back into the game and persuade them that I'll be a better boss to everyone again. This shouldn't be too bad. I mean, I trust them and they trust me to make the right decision, right?"

Ayano hesitated at first. "I'm afraid of what Shido has up his sleeve."

"What do you mean?" Kagami asked.

Before Ayano could respond, Kagami's cell phone began ringing again and she saw it was once again Matsuri's number calling her. Becoming frustrated, she turned her phone off and dropped it in one of her desk drawers.

"I mean, you're accusing Shido of some pretty serious allegations and I believe you and everything, Kagami. The problem though is convincing everyone else. Shido went to Waseda University and is one of their most distinguished alumni. He's well known at that school and has a clean background in all aspects. He's also best friends with several politicians in Tokyo and in the Prime Minister's party. Pinning something like domestic violence against him isn't going to be easy." Ayano replied.

Kagami nodded. "I know, I know. But I still have to try."

As the two women continued to talk, they heard commotion outside, as if something new was happening and they decided to investigate. Kagami opened her office door and to her sudden horror, she saw Koichi Shido standing in the main hallway talking to a few associates. Her temper flared and she immediately rushed over as Ayano followed.

"What the hell are you doing here?!" Kagami yelled. "I fired you so you have exactly ten seconds to get out of my building before I call security and have you thrown out!"

To her surprise, Shido's response was calm and confident, as if he knew what was about to happen next. "Kagami, I understand that you terminated my position here but I believe we should talk first, one lawyer to another. I know I speak for everyone when I say I have only the interest of the law at heart and that I know this is your firm and I respect that. However, in light of recent events, I still believe that we're all entitled to a fair voice when something as valuable as a law firm is at stake. That is why I have spoken to the associates and they believe an initiation of the Safety Clause is in order."

Kagami looked around at her fellow lawyers and people she trusted as they slowly nodded while looking at her. This couldn't be happening. Kagami suddenly felt cornered and alone and she believed that Ayano was right. Shido clearly had the advantage of everyone siding with him. Nevertheless, she had to say something.

"This is my firm and I will say whether or not a vote of that nature is in order and I'm saying that it's not!" Kagami yelled again and beginning to let her temper get the better of her. "You have no right to come into everything I've built and try and take it away from me!"

"Kagami, I assure you I'm doing no such thing." Shido said in a calm voice and earning more points from the witnesses around him. "After all, you are the one who has been acting strange lately. Losing important clients such as Kawazu-san, getting sick at board meetings, and now disappearing from work. To be honest, I also think I know why you decided to break up with me as well. You've been seeing someone else, haven't you?"

Kagami's heart sped up and she gulped. Her trembling body language didn't help her case, especially when she stuttered and began to sweat.

"I see you're speechless so I guess I'll finish for you." Shido said and cleared his throat. "You have been seeing someone else. And to make matters worse...you've been seeing another woman."

Gasps echoed across the large corridors as all of Kagami's fellow lawyers looked at each other and began to gossip. More people began to converge onto the location drawn by curiosity that now seemed to be the center of the universe as Shido continued to mount his assault against Kagami's career.

"I...I...I don't know what you're talking about...!" Kagami's squeaky voice sounded but her trembling legs and body began to prove otherwise.

"Then I would hope you will be able to explain this to me." Shido reached into his jacket pocket and retracted a photograph and when he held it up, Kagami felt her world was set ablaze.

The photograph was of her holding Konata Izumi close at their outdoor café as they kissed each other. Kagami's eyes filled with tears at the sight as she looked around and saw her lawyers giving her looks of shock, disgust, anger, and everything else in-between. Kagami's knees suddenly gave out and she fell to the floor and hugged herself as tight as she could, fearing everything about her was about to fall apart.

"And to think I trusted you, Kagami. I opened my heart to you and you betrayed me like this." Shido said in another acting voice, one of a heartbroken man and to Kagami's horror, the lawyers in her firm began to place their hands on Shido's shoulders to comfort him. "And you know what, Kagami? Despite this infidelity, I still want to keep coming here and to work as hard as I can because like I said, at the end of the day, I care about the law and this firm. We're entrusted by the people to represent them in fair and professional ways and the country needs people like us. You have disgraced your profession, Kagami."

Breathing hard, Kagami looked up with tears running down her face and her teeth grinding. "You liar! I bet you're the one who made me sick that one board meeting! You put something in my water!"

"Kagami, I drank the exact same water you did." Shido calmly said.

"You did something!" She angrily retorted.

"I'm sorry, Kagami, but the burden of proof is sitting on your shoulders." Shido calmly said again.

Everyone turned back to Kagami and awaited her response. Still trembling on the floor, she whispered, "I...I can't prove it, but I just know it!"

"You're a lawyer, Kagami. This is all elementary and the fact that you're accusing me of a misdeed with no proof is quite frankly disturbing to me." Shido responded, clearly gaining the upper hand. "I do not believe that you're...healthy...to keep your position. If you have any respect for the law, you might want to consider taking some time off and compose yourself. You do have a history of mental health issues after all."

Kagami once again felt another piece of her existence collapse as she stuttered again. "Wha...what...what are...you...t...talking ab...about...?"

"It wasn't your fault, but after your sister was horrendously violated, you lost a bit of your mentality and tried to become your own sister." Shido responded with an endless calm demeanor. "It's because of all of these occurrences that lead me to believe that you're not capable of running this firm or leading these fine men and women in the manner they deserve. It's because of this and your questionable character with this blue-haired woman that has led me to call for the initiation of the Safety Clause and I propose a Vote of No Confidence."

Kagami looked at her sweaty palms as her hands shook. This had to be a nightmare. This man that once always said he loved her now stood above her with all the fabricated proof he needed to make her look like the worst human being alive. It only made Kagami feel worse when she was able to hear her fellow associates vocalize their support for Shido. Each stare from her fellow lawyers felt like dagger stab to her body and she suddenly lost her ability to speak. In her mind, there was nothing that could make this situation any worse.

As the shocked firm awaited their disgruntled leader's response, a new voice sounded from behind the crowd. "Is there a Kagami Hiiragi here?"

The crowd parted and turned and revealed two police officers standing side-by-side. Kagami looked up and slowly pulled herself to her feet. She slowly stepped forward as all eyes were on her as her broken voice stated, "I'm Kagami Hiiragi."

The police officers slowly approached Kagami and one said, "Hiiragi-san, my name is Officer Yoshimizu and I need to have a word with you, ma'am. Is there a private place we can talk?"

Still absorbing the full shock of what had just taken place in her own firm, Kagami slowly nodded as she wiped her eyes and guided the police officer to her office. When the door of Kagami's office closed, Ayano quickly scurried over to confront the other officer, who was about to start asking questions about Kagami.

"Excuse me, but what is this about?" Ayano asked.

With the major associates and Shido watching, everyone gasped further when the officer replied, "There's been a death in the family. Foul play is suspected so we're just taking formal steps for now."

Ayano covered her hands with her mouth and shook her head. Before the second officer could ask any of the associates a single question, Kagami's high-pitch scream tore through the building. When everyone quickly turned their heads to look at her office door, it flew open and Kagami stormed out, her face an uncontrollable watery mess and she had Shido in her sights. She ran as hard as she could as the associates cleared out of her way but the second officer quickly grabbed Kagami and wrestled her to the ground.

"Shido! What have you done?! What did you do?! What did you do?!" Kagami screamed and thrashed relentlessly as the first officer came out of her office and assisted in grabbing Kagami as she flailed.

Each officer took one of Kagami's arms and led her kicking and screaming out of her firm as Shido fixed his jacket collar and cleared his throat and put on another act. "I'm...I cannot even begin to express my deepest sympathies for Kagami and her loss, whoever it was. But as I said before, we're all here for a reason; to support and uphold the law in this great nation of ours. We cannot afford to have such crises and family drama that keeps coming from the Hiiragi family taint either this firm or this profession. I still move to Vote No Confidence in Kagami Hiiragi and I nominate myself to be this firm's new leader...even if it's only temporary. However, I still highly encourage all of you to keep Kagami and her family in your thoughts and prayers through this obviously devastating ordeal."

Ayano Minegishi slowly backed away and consumed by fear when she witnessed the entire fellow associates begin to applaud Koichi Shido and it was going to be a unanimous vote. After the evidence he put forth and the act displayed by Kagami, especially after hearing of a family member's demise, no one was going to second guess Shido as he smiled and thanked the crowd for their support, a disturbing twinkle glistening in his eyes.

CHAPTER 11

Her heart pounded with anxiety as she sat in her father's living room and watched the older man weep. Konata fought the tears mounting in her eyes as she held her head low after confessing to her father that she wasn't long for this world. Seeking refuge, Konata quickly glanced at her older cousin in Yui, who also held her head low with a depressed face after watching the blue-haired woman tell the older man the devastating news. Why was this happening to Sojiro again? As if losing the love of his life all those years ago wasn't bad enough, now he was losing his only child to the same fate.

"Why...? Why, Konata? Why didn't you come to me earlier?" Sojiro asked while wiping his eyes. "You're my daughter...my only child. Now you come to me and say I'm going to lose you...just like your mother?!"

Konata sniffed and a teardrop escaped her eye and splashed on her hand as it rested on her knee. "You're right, I'm sorry, dad. I should've told you right away...but I didn't know how. What you're saying is true. How does an only child tell her only living parent that she's going to die?"

Sojiro's crying episode deepened as he knew Konata was right. This was a bad situation for both of them. Yui also struggled to hold in her emotions as her trembling showed. She still to this day remembered when Kanata died and she was drafted into playing the supportive role for her uncle and a mother figure for Konata. Though it started out as a tragic event, it did do some good for Yui; it brought her closer to Konata and they formed a closer bond because of it. Regrettably, things weren't looking good for that bond.

"Dad...there's also something else you should know...and I believe that this information is more important than my medical problems." Konata said and Yui saw her cousin tighten up. This was definitely more important to Konata.

Sojiro slowly raised his head with devastated intrigue.

"I'm...I'm in love, dad." Konata whispered but suddenly realized that she couldn't keep saying it quietly, as if she should be ashamed and should be hiding it. She deepened her voice and repeated, "I'm in love. I have found the love of my life and I'm going to spend the remainder of my life with the woman I love."

Sojiro's eyebrow twitched. "Woman?"

Konata nodded. "Yes, dad. You know her...her name is Kagami Hiiragi."

Her father's reaction was surprisingly complacent. The only reaction he gave was a slight gulp before he asked, "Hiiragi?"

Konata nodded again.

"I...I see..." Sojiro whispered and lowered his head.

The blue-haired woman's heart began to speed up and she feared her father disapproved of this, maybe even hated it. She swallowed too and asked, "D...dad...are you upset?"

Sojiro looked up again. "Does...does being with her make you happy, Konata?"

Konata's reactions lit up and smiled lightly, warming the father's heart. "Yes, dad. She makes me very happy."

"And she treats you good?"

Konata nodded.

"And you treat her good?"

Konata nodded.

Sojiro's eyes darted to the right and left until he formed a small smile while wiping another tear away. "Then that's all that matters, Konata. As long as you're happy. That's all a father cares about and if you're happy with Kagami, then I'll support you and accept her with open arms. I love you, Konata."

Konata couldn't contain her happiness any longer and her tears flowed from her eyes. Her initial news to her father was devastating but there was one silver lining in this horrible ordeal. One of Konata's biggest fears was that her only parent wouldn't accept her for who she was and she would have to deal with that stress up until she took her last breath. Konata quickly leapt from her seat and hugged her father close as Yui watched with a misshaped smile on her face and held her hands together.

When Konata disconnected herself from her father, she stood and wiped her tears and collected his hands in hers. "I love you so much, daddy. You've made me so happy and you have done more than most fathers would for their daughters. Thank you...for everything. For being there for me...for making sure I never had a sad day in my life. And now...I'll be able to finally meet mom."

Hearing the last sentence was all that Sojiro needed to hear to jumpstart another emotional outburst. More tears formed in his eyes and he quickly reeled his daughter into another hug while whispering her name. He held her tight, as if he feared that if he let go, he would lose her forever as Yui continued to watch with emotional eyes.

She suddenly remembered the phone conversation she had the other day with Yutaka regarding this tragedy in the making. It wasn't pretty on the other end when Yui broke the news. Because Yutaka had the personality that she had regarding her cousin, she went into an emotional spew that involved many tears and the fact that she was stuck in Europe for fashion shows with Tsukasa only made her stress skyrocket. She promised to be on the next plane to Tokyo but didn't know when that would be. More than anything, Yui feared the sudden stress would put Yutaka's fragile health at stake.

Konata's cell phone began ringing and her father allowed her to pull away from the tight hug and retract it from her pocket. She was surprised to see that the screen was projecting a number she didn't recognize and it was out of curiosity that persuaded Konata to answer it.

"Hello?" She asked with confusion in her voice.

"Izumi-san, it's me, Ayano Minegishi." The voice said.

"Oh, Minegishi, this is quite a surprise. What can I do for you?" Konata asked.

"We have a huge problem on our hands. Kagami's father is dead." Ayano quickly said.

Hearing this new development made Konata's eyes explode and trigger her to stutter relentlessly and the emotions mounted inside her. She still didn't

know the late Tadao Hiiragi as well but could only imagine what Kagami was going through right now. After stuttering, Konata finally formulated a short sentence.

"What happened?!" She exclaimed.

"The police are saying that someone put poison in his coffee and they arrested Kagami's mother because an empty bottle of it was found in her apron!" Ayano exclaimed.

Konata nearly lost grip of her phone as Yui and Sojiro watched in confusion. "That...that's impossible! Miki would never kill her own husband!"

"I know, I know, but Kagami is a mess! She keeps yelling and screaming that Shido did it but the police already cleared him of any involvement. I'm with Kagami now at her apartment so you need to get over here now." Ayano added.

"Put her on the phone." Konata quickly ordered.

"I can't, she's locked herself in her bedroom and won't come out. I hear her crying for her father and for you so please hurry." Ayano finished.

Konata barely had time to say goodbye when she closed her phone and readied herself to go while her father and cousin asked her what was going on. She did her best to bring them up to speed with the little information she had but when she said who Kagami thought was involved in this murder, she turned to her cousin.

"Yui, couldn't you run a background check on this guy for anything?" Konata asked.

"Konata, you know I'm not a cop anymore. I haven't been for three years. I'm retired now and I'm enjoying that." Yui replied.

"I know but there has to be something you could do. Look, just do me a favor and at least roll the idea around for a bit, would you? For me?" Konata asked.

Yui rolled her eyes and added, "Fine...I'll see what I can do."

Konata thanked her cousin, hugged her father one last time, and dashed out of the house to comfort the love of her life. This was a serious turn of events for the blue-haired woman and this proved that her remaining days were going to be filled with drama now that Kagami's father was dead and her mother was in jail. Little did Konata know that this tragic event in the Hiiragi family wasn't even the tip of the iceberg yet as she was still oblivious to Shido's influence spreading like the Black Death in Kagami's law firm. For Kagami, the Vote of No Confidence went through and it was a unanimous decision in favor of Shido. He now controlled the firm she

worked so painstakingly hard to create from the bottom-up and was now living her dream, leaving Kagami a broken woman.

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When Konata arrived at Kagami's apartment, she rushed in and saw Ayano sitting next to the closed bedroom door. Ayano's depressed face lit up when she saw the petite woman approach with haste and she turned to the door where they could still hear crying coming from.

"Kagami, Konata is here. Will you talk to her?" Ayano asked.

Konata knocked on the bedroom door and said, "Kagami...I heard about what happened. I'm so sorry that this happened to you. I wish I could tell you I know how you feel but I'm just as devastated as you are. Please, unlock the door and let me come in. Remember what you told me the other day at the café? You told me that you're not going anywhere and that you'll stay with me until the end. You also told me that you've already accepted everything about me and that you want me to do the same. I already have, Kagami, a long time ago. I love you and like you told me at the hospital, your pain is my pain. Every blow inflicted onto you is also inflicted onto me. So please, please open your heart to me, Kagami."

There was a long pause until Ayano and Konata heard a rustling inside the bedroom and they all breathed a sigh of relief when they heard the door unlock. Kagami slowly opened the door, revealing the absolute devastation on her face. Her eyes like two waterfalls and her hair a tangled mess,

Kagami slowly opened the door and allowed Konata to enter as she continued to sniff.

As Konata slowly walked in, she turned to Ayano and told her she could take it from there and thanked her for staying with Kagami. As Ayano smiled and left the apartment, Konata slowly approached the bed in the darkened room where Kagami was curled on, a mountain of used tissues littering the floor around her. While Kagami continued to cry, Konata sat on the empty side and ran her hand across Kagami's head, who instinctively turned and nestled closer to the warm and loving touch.

Konata collected Kagami as she cried and held her head to her chest and continued to rub her head and pat her back, allowing her to vent her emotions. Kagami snuggled closer into Konata's body while she continued to cry, slowing down only when Konata began to hum to her in a voice that began to sooth her. Completely drained of energy, Kagami sniffed several times and eventually pulled away but Konata continued to hum for her and kissed her on the top of her head.

"Now...tell me, what happened." Konata whispered.

Kagami's broken voice tried to talk but it only pushed out squeaks and hiccups at first. It took more humming and kisses from Konata to finally calm Kagami down enough to where she could finally speak.

"My father...he's dead, Konata." She wailed. "The police...they came to my home...while my niece and nephew were there. They had to watch the police take their grandmother away in handcuffs. Aito...Kiyora...they had

to watch that...and Matsuuri was forced to explain why those men had to take my mother away. How do you explain that to children their ages?"

Konata cringed at that idea. "Kagami...Ayano told me that you believe Shido did it." Konata said, keeping up her comforting.

Kagami's body tightened and she trembled with angry fury upon hearing the name. "He did do it. I know he did. You have to believe me when I tell you this, Konata..."

"I do, Kagami, I do believe you. There has to be something we can do to prove that he did it." Konata reassured her ailing lover. "But more than anything we need to get your mother out of jail and you need to be there for you family. They need you now. I know this is an impossible situation, but there are two children that need all the love and support they can get."

Konata was right. However, Kagami's knowledge of the law made her cringe even more as she shook her head. "We won't be able to get her out of jail for at least forty-eight hours while the prosecution makes their case. They could even hold her their up to ten days if the prosecution asks."

Vocalizing it only made Kagami cry again while thinking that now the only way she could see her mother was through glass. Konata sighed and decided she needed to help take Kagami's mind off this problem. "I confessed to my father about us."

Kagami sniffed again and slowly looked up. "What...what did he...say...?"

Continuing to pat Kagami's back, Konata said, "He said that he loves me and that if I'm happy, that's all that matters."

Kagami looked away and nodded.

"You need to tell them too, Kagami." Konata whispered. "The longer you drag it out, the more it'll hurt your family. Like I said, your family needs you now."

Slowly sitting up, Kagami wiped her eyes again and continued to sniff. "You're...you're right. I need to be there for them and I need to tell them. But...I...I...I don't want to go...alone."

The ailing woman felt a smaller hand place itself on her shoulder and she turned to see Konata holding her and looking at her. "Like I said, I'm not going anywhere."

A broken, misshaped grin formed across Kagami's face and she placed her hand on top of Konata's resting on her shoulder. The two pulled each other closer and kissed tenderly, each giving the other strength through their lips. When their kiss was complete, Konata rested her head on Kagami's shoulder, still giving her lover the strength she needed to face her family in their hour of need.

Kagami showered and did her best to put her broken self back together for her family. Not only did she have to be there for them after the passing of Tadao, but now she struggled to establish when the appropriate time would be to tell her family that she was in a relationship with Konata. She knew that there was a strong possibility that she was walking into yet another typhoon and feared that Shido may have had a larger role in this than she thought.

And what of Miki Hiiragi? Anyone in their right mind would know that she was innocent of this crime yet all the current evidence pointed to her as the culprit. Despite the fact that she was under arrest for murder, Kagami also knew that that wasn't going to be as devastating to Miki as being barred from her own husband's funeral was going to be. The only thing worse than being framed for murdering your spouse was not being allowed to say your final goodbye to them because you're sitting in a jail cell.

The trip to Saitama for Kagami and Konata was long and quiet. Konata wanted to talk and reassure her girlfriend that everything was going to be okay and that her family was going to look to her for strength. Only a few months ago that would've been impossible as Shido had her wrapped around his wicked finger, but Kagami had since rekindled her own strength when she came to terms with who she was on the inside. With Konata by her side, she felt that dealing with the pain of losing her father was going to be easier. While Kagami drove with one hand on the steering wheel, her other hand was occupied by holding Konata's the entire trip.

Konata knew that Kagami was nervous halfway through the trip. By the time they reached the halfway point, Kagami's hand began to sweat. It wasn't until they eyed the Hiiragi property when Kagami's sweaty hand began to tremble relentlessly and her breathing became shallow. Konata cupped Kagami's hand with her other free hand and began to rub them softly until she began to relax.

"How do you want to handle this?" Konata asked as she continued to hold Kagami's hand.

Kagami gulped. "Let's be subtle for now. When they find out, I'll be the one who tells them. I don't want them to figure it out by watching some sort of gesture."

Konata nodded slowly and released Kagami's hand. Kagami was right when she said that she had to be the one to tell her family members instead of letting them find out by watching her kiss Konata or hold her hand. Walking side-by-side each other, Kagami and Konata approached the Hiiragi household and Kagami knocked twice and entered her family's home. They were immediately blasted by the aroma of shattered emotions. The first thing they could hear was the sound of a little girl crying and Kagami recognized it to be Kiyora.

As they entered the foyer, Inori rounded the corner, her eyes burning red and when she saw her little sister, the tears once again returned and she began to cry. She uttered Kagami's name and rushed over to her, trapping her in a hug and barely noticed the shorter blue-haired woman standing next to her. Seeing Inori's reaction restarted Kagami's inability to contain herself and she hugged her sister back, also releasing the tears.

Matsuri turned the corner and when she saw the sister she clashed with in the past but deep down always loved her with the utmost intensity standing in the foyer, she too succumbed to her emotions. She rushed over and joined the growing group hug as the three pairs of eyes continued to drip endlessly. As they continued to hold each other tightly, the youngest

members of the Hiiragi family in Aito and Kiyora slowly looked around the corner and saw their Aunt Kagami hugging her sisters.

When Kagami pulled away and saw their faces staring at her, she formed a smile and felt her heart warm as she slowly approached them. She bent down and opened her arms, expecting them to rush over and hug her. Instead, Kiyora formed a face of fear upon seeing her aunt and backed away while Aito shot a glare so angry at her it went into Kagami's eyes and pierced her heart. He quickly turned and ran as fast as he could and his sister followed with haste.

Stunned and even horrified, Kagami slowly turned to her sisters and said, "What was that about?"

Inori and Matsuri glanced at each other and looked back at Kagami. Inori took the initiative and said, "We were actually hoping that you would be able to explain that to us."

Kagami climbed to her feet and gave a confused look. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Matsuri stepped forward. "When dad died, Aito kept screaming 'Aunt Kagami killed grandpa! Aunt Kagami killed grandpa!' Why would he say such things?"

Hearing this tore Kagami to shreds on the inside and she even clutched her chest as the pain engulfed her heart. "I...I have no idea! Why would he

believe something so ludicrous?!"

Inori and Matsuri shook their heads and shrugged. Matsuri searched her memory and said, "Maybe it had something to do with that thing Shido told the kids this morning."

Kagami's external expressions exploded like a bomb. "Shido was here?! When?! What did he say?!"

"Calm down, Kagami!" Matsuri exclaimed. "He came here to say goodbye to the kids but before he left, he whispered something to the kids and I tried to get them to tell me what it was...then I heard mom screaming and then..."

Matsuri started crying again, remembering the horrific sight she came across when she plowed into her parents' house. She saw her father lying face down on the floor and spewing bubbling foam from his mouth as her mother tried to revive him. She immediately called for help but there was nothing the paramedics could do when they arrived. Tadao Hiiragi was pronounced dead at the scene and because of the circumstances, the police were involved as well. They searched the house and came across the empty glass vile in Miki's apron, leaving the police no choice but to arrest her. What stuck out in Matsuri's mind the most was watching the confused and frightened looks on Aito and Kiyora when they saw the policemen take their crying grandmother away in handcuffs.

"He had something to do with it." Kagami stated as a fact. "I know he did. That glass vile had to have come from him and he had to have placed it in

her apron."

"Kagami, listen to what you're saying. We can all agree that Shido is a scum-sucking animal but you're accusing him of murder." Inori replied.

"Then explain how that glass vile got in mom's apron!" Kagami snapped. "Really, Inori, look at the logic. Which one is more likely to be the murderer of our father?! Our mother or Shido?"

Inori couldn't argue with the logic. Still, the burden of proof once again rested on Kagami's shoulders. There had to be something she could do to clear her mother's name and expose Shido for the monster that he was. The problems for Kagami continued to mount in her firm, in her personal life, and now in her family life.

Minoru Shiraishi stayed late with his in-laws to give his emotional support in this trying time. This was a tragic day for the Hiiragi family and it all began with the murder of Tadao Hiiragi, followed up by Kagami being voted out of her own law firm. There was still one more thing she needed to confess to her family later that night. Kagami had hoped that her niece and nephew would be out of the house by then but it didn't seem likely when Matsuri asked Minoru and the children to stay. Matsuri didn't want to be alone that night, which everyone understood.

Later that night, Kagami, Konata and Inori sat at the Hiiragi family table where they used to eat together as the lights above them kept the area lit. They watched Matsuri stand in the next room with a phone to her ear and

they all cringed when they heard her open the dialogue. "Hey, Tsukasa, it's me. Listen, I'm afraid I have some very bad news for you..."

The three women turned away as Matsuri began to inform the youngest Hiiragi daughter of the devastating news. Kagami looked and saw Minoru sitting in the living room with the sleeping Kiyora in his arms and Aito sleeping next to him.

"Sorry you had to visit us on such bad circumstances, Izumi-san." Inori said politely, finally acknowledging Konata's existence.

Konata shook her head. "It's fine. I certainly understand."

Kagami tightened herself when she saw her oldest sister having a conversation with the one she loved the most. How were they going to take this news after their father had passed away? Would they feel betrayed or would they accept Konata as easily as Sojiro accepted Kagami? Trembling, Kagami tried to calm herself by breathing deeply, but it only caught the attention of Inori.

"Kagami...are you okay?" Inori's voice was filled with concern but Kagami could tell that Inori thought she was still struggling with accepting their father's death based on her tone.

Kagami nodded. "Yes...I'm...I actually have something to tell you..."

Konata looked over with a nervous expression as Kagami took a deep breath.

"What is it, Kagami?" Inori asked.

Taking one final breath, Kagami looked at Inori and was about to open her mouth when Matsuri reentered the room and said, "I just got off the phone with Tsukasa and get this; she's on her way home as we speak. She's over Russia right now."

Inori gave a confused look. "She's on her way home? But she's only halfway through this year's fashion season. She shouldn't be home for a couple of months."

"Yeah well get this also; the reason she's on her way home is because her personal assistant's cousin is dying." Matsuri added.

Dead silence fell between everyone. Kagami quickly glanced at Konata, who suddenly formed a depressed face and lowered her head as it seemed no matter what the situation was around her, she couldn't escape her fate. Inori and Matsuri however were still oblivious.

"Oh no, Yutaka's cousin is going to die? That's terrible." Inori said and she turned to Konata. "Izumi-san, who's the cousin that Yutaka is going to see? We should send our condolences, too."

They saw the depressed look on Konata's face but still couldn't put it together. Kagami on the other hand could and cleared her throat, grabbing their attention. "I...I actually have something I need to say...about a related topic."

Inori and Matsuri looked at each other and shrugged. "Okay, what is it, Kagami?" Matsuri asked.

Kagami slowly scooted her chair closer to Konata and reached under the table and her strength was lit on fire when she felt Konata's hand was open and ready for hers. Their two hands connected under the table and Kagami took one final breath.

"The truth is...I'm in love." Kagami said. "I realized recently that I'm not like you two or Tsukasa for that matter. I was with Shido because I felt that I needed to be. To be with a man because I felt that that's what was expected of me. That is...until a friend who works for me helped me wake up and rediscover who I am inside...and the truth is...I like women. And not just women...I'm in love with Konata Izumi."

Inori and Matsuri stared at their sister with blank expressions. The only sound in the room was the ticking of another clock as Konata and Kagami anxiously awaited the older Hiiragi sisters' reactions. It started out simple when Inori and Matsuri exchanged looks with each other, still with blank expressions, as if they were hoping the other would speak first. This had shaped to be one hard day for them and it seemed to only get stranger.

"Um...you're...you're a...a...a lesbian?" Matsuri stuttered.

Kagami nodded with confidence. "I am."

More blank expressions came from Inori and Matsuri, as well as stutters. Neither Kagami nor Konata could determine whether the older Hiiragi sisters were either angry or upset. Their looks didn't present anger but plenty of surprise and confusion, though experience says it starts with confusion and the anger is usually close behind.

Matsuri began to shake and she quickly took a seat before she fell and simply said, "Kagami...I'm sorry, but could you say who you like again because for a second I thought I somehow developed a drug habit."

Kagami sneered at Matsuri. "Fine. I'm telling you two that I'm a woman who only finds other women attractive and I love Konata Izumi. She is my lover."

"So he was right!" A new and angry voice cried nearby.

Everyone in the kitchen turned and saw Aito standing in the doorway with a look of pure anger. A look that should never be on a child his age as the women stood and looked at him. Inori slowly approached and said, "Aito-chan, what's the matter? What do you mean?"

"You're responsible for grandpa's death!" Aito yelled, tears forming in his eyes again. "Shido-sama warned me about you! How you stopped coming

to see us and now this!"

Now the looks on Kagami, Inori, Matsuri, and Konata were ones of terror. Matsuri took the initiative and exclaimed, "Aito-chan, what did Shido tell you this morning at the shrine?!"

Aito searched his memory and replayed the moment his idol whispered to him and his sister. Shido's words still echoed in his mind.

Remember, children, when women love women...it kills the ones you love.

Kagami bent down on her knees and outstretched her arms. "Aito-chan, listen to me. You're right, I haven't been a good aunt to you lately but I'm here now and from now on I'll always be here for you and your sister. But I never did anything to hurt your grandfather!"

"Liar!" Aito yelled and quickly ran away.

Minoru suddenly came in while holding the sleeping Kiyora and looked at the hurt look on Kagami's face as she slowly pulled herself back to her feet. Kagami still didn't know what lies Shido fed her niece and nephew but knew they were damaging as it was showing. This only made her feel more ashamed that she at one point had feelings for that monster and coward that would try and destroy Kagami's mentality through the two children she loved with all her heart and soul. Feeling the pain of her nephew's words, she cringed as the moment continued to replay in her mind.

"What happened?" Minoru asked.

Inori and Matsuri exchanged looks with each other again and sighed as their energy was all but depleted. Inori simply responded, "Oh...this and that."

Minoru turned and followed his grieving son to try and find out his side of the story, leaving the women alone and uncomfortable again. After a few tense seconds of silence and not wanting to discuss Kagami's sexual orientation anymore, a knock was suddenly heard at their front door.

Matsuri groaned. "Oh...what fresh batch of hell have the gods prepared for us now?"

Kagami suddenly snapped herself out of her hurt trance and to everyone's surprise, she smiled. What surprised them even more than her facial reaction was her vocal reaction when she said, "Salvation. That's what they have prepared for us."

Kagami quickly rushed over to the front door and opened it. Feeling waves of relief and nostalgic happiness, Kagami reeled this person into a massive hug and thanked her relentlessly for coming all the way from her home to see her and her lover. She remembered calling her from the hospital after Konata was admitted because of her fever and Kagami felt that she wielded the power of the heavens when she was able to summon this angel to come to the rescue. Kagami pulled this person into her former home.

"I'm forever in your debt for coming all this way." Kagami's crying voice said.

Konata continued to sit at the table until she heard a familiar voice reply, "No need to thank me, Kagami-san. This is important to me, too."

Konata's head shot up and her eyes nearly exploded. "That...that voice. It couldn't be..."

"Why hello there, Konata-san. It's been awhile." The sweet voice said.

Konata slowly turned and her heart pounded when she saw the pink-haired Miyuki standing before her. She was as majestic as the day they last saw each other in their college days as she stood in her dress suit while holding a black carrying bag in front of her.

"Mi...Miyuki." Konata whispered.

Miyuki smiled and took a seat next to Konata as the Hiiragi sisters watched. Miyuki cupped Konata's cheeks in her hands and whispered, "I'm here for you now."

CHAPTER 12

Watching with satisfied and cunning eyes, Shido grinned as he watched the professional movers he hired carry out all of Kagami's possessions she left behind in her office. Her desk was carried out, as were her degrees from school, personal articles and books, as well as pictures of her with either her friends or family. When the movers carried out the last of Kagami's things, Shido walked back into the now spacious office that once belonged to the once renowned lawyer. Looking around, he continued to think of his plans for this room and what he wanted to do with all the power he now had in his grasp.

A shining piece of silver caught his eye on the floor and when he glanced over, he saw it was a small picture frame from Kagami's desk. He bent down and as he stood again with it in his grip, he smirked at seeing the older picture. It was of the Hiiragi family outside the shrine with Tadao and Miki standing side-by-side and their four daughters with them. What made this picture unique was that Tsukasa was standing with Minoru, her stomach enlarged with their first child inside her. Everyone was smiling and happy, something that wasn't seen in the Hiiragi household now.

"Gone are the days of their happiness." Shido whispered to himself with his satisfied smirk still on his face as he walked back to his desk.

As he neared the desk, Shido took the frame and maliciously dropped it in his wastebasket, shattering the glass and breaking the frame. He picked up the basket and walked out to where his secretary, Ayano Minegishi sat and typed. Seeing him approach her made her cringe and look away in fear as he stood in front of her and dropped the wastebasket on her desk.

"Throw this out for me." He ordered coldly and turned to leave.

Ayano slowly stood and looked in the basket. When she saw the broken frame and torn picture sitting in with the trash, her anger boiled as she looked up again and said, "I'm planning on resigning from this position."

Shido froze and turned to her. "Why is that?"

"Don't play stupid with me. You know damn well why. You humiliated Kagami in front of everyone and for what? For her firm? For power? You're insane." Ayano growled while trying to keep her temper under control.

Shido grinned. "If I'm insane, then I'm an insane genius. I've been planning on taking over this firm for a long time and Kagami walked right into everything I laid out for her because she's too damn stupid to see handwriting on the walls. This is the corporate world, Minegishi, and only the strongest and smartest survive."

Ayano tightened her glare. "Kagami trusted you...because she wanted to see the good in you. That's the kind of person she is; someone who will never stop helping someone in need or giving them a fair chance as long as they prove themselves to be a hard worker. You're just a spineless snake in the grass."

To her surprise, Shido chuckled. "It seems to me you're trying to get your last two cents in before you leave. It's too bad you won't be quitting this job."

Ayano raised her eyebrows. "Come again?"

"I know it was you that built Kagami's strength back up that one day when she confronted me for the first time. You would love it if I fired you, Minegishi, but your punishment must be more severe and the way I see it, what's more fitting than you being forced to call me your boss instead of Kagami and to see me continue to take everything that was once hers?"

Ayano's teeth gritted and her knuckles tightened on her desk. "You'll never be able to keep me here, Shido."

"You won't have a choice." Shido responded with a confident smile. "Maybe you haven't realized it by now...but I'm a very influential person. I have friends in very high places and if you walk out, I can easily make sure that you never get another job for the rest of your life. One bad reference from me and you'll be living in the streets before the month is out. A person's work record follows them for the rest of their life so tell me, Minegishi, what will your decision be?"

Ayano's heart pounded and her face's angry expressions melted away to form a new and frightened look as she slowly sat back down. "You're... you're pure evil."

Keeping his confident smile, Shido simply replied, "I'm necessary evil. Now, either take that wastebasket and dump everything in it down the garbage chute or pack up your things and go familiarize yourself with dumpster life."

Ayano lowered her head and gulped while slowly standing and she gripped the basket. She looked up at Shido with trembling eyes and nodded meekly as she took the basket and was about to leave her desk to go to the garbage chute. As she began to walk though, Shido stopped her one last time.

"And as your first punishment for talking back to me...I want you to take that necklace of yours and dump it down the chute, too." He commanded.

Ayano's eyes suddenly flooded as she looked down at the thin silver chain around her neck with a small silver heart pendant with Japanese characters engraved on it. "But...but this is my grandmother's. She gave it to me before she passed away and I promised her I would take care of it. It has my sister's and I's initials on it."

Shido's face remained placid and cold. "You heard me. Get rid of it, or you'll be the one going through that chute and into your new lifestyle."

Ayano gulped again and slowly nodded with an emotional face and reluctantly removed her necklace and dropped it in the wastebasket. "Ye... yes."

"Yes...what?" Shido snarled.

"Yes...Shido-sama." Ayano corrected herself with a depressed voice.

"Good...then when you're done with that, pickup my dry-cleaning. I don't want to pay for it myself so I'll just take it out of your next paycheck, now move." He ordered coldly and returned to the former office of Kagami Hiiragi and closed the door behind him.

Ayano tried to hold back her own emotions as she took the wastebasket and walked it through the upper floor of the law firm and to the janitorial area. She found the large metal hatch on the wall and pulled it open only to see a bottomless pit of black leading downward to the garbage dumpster outside in the alley. Swallowing her emotions, she lifted the basket up and for a second considered hiding the picture and her necklace, but knew the lengths Shido would take to torture her. It wouldn't surprise her if he would search her desk or even her person to make sure the necklace and picture were both gone. Lowering her head and uttering an apology, she dumped the contents of the basket down the metal chute and could hear the unholy clanging of the broken frame and her personal jewelry bouncing off the iron walls.

Things were only getting worse.

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"Okay Konata-san, I know this will all seem redundant, but I'm going to need to take a few samples from you. These, as I'm sure you know, will include blood, urine, hair, saliva, and a few skin cells as well. You never know where a possible cure can present itself in the human body. Some of these samples will also serve as a 'gage' to show me how your body will react to every experiment I try and...at worst case scenario...how much time I have left to work with." Miyuki said to her blue-haired friend.

The two women sat alone in an examination room in the same hospital where Konata was first admitted after Kagami found her in the bathroom. Using her medical credentials and people skills, Miyuki was able to convince the hospital to let her setup there as another consult to monitor and research Konata. The doctors at the hospital didn't see any harm but for more pessimistic reasons. They had already given up on trying to find a cure for Konata but Miyuki kept a better frame of mind, one that told her if no cure existed, she would create one herself if she needed to.

Konata nodded and looked at Miyuki. She was dressed in a professional dress suit while wearing her white lab coat and still sporting her glasses. Her pink hair was still long and tied behind her back in a ponytail. Sitting in a chair with one leg crossing the other, Miyuki continued to write notes in her log to chart the beginning of her attempts to cure Konata, her smile still on her face.

Though Konata knew she meant well, the blue-haired woman had practically joined her other doctors in calling it quits. This frame of mind wasn't good for Konata and it showed on her face as she averted her eyes downward to stare at the floor.

"Any questions, Konata-san?" Miyuki asked with the voice that soothed even the worst of situations.

Konata looked up again. "Are...are you going to cure me, Miyuki?"

"I promise you I'll do the best I can but I unfortunately cannot promise you anything, Konata-san. Despite what you may hear, medical science is only a

science half of the time. The other half of the time it's considered an art and leaves a lot to be desired." Miyuki replied with confidence. "The human body is an incredible and complex machine that works differently in every case. What will work for one won't always work for others. But rest assured I will sacrifice all of my time and energy to find a cure for you. I have your medical records, as well as your mother's so at least I'll have enough material to go on and I'll look for things that your mother's doctors may have missed."

Konata nodded again with little enthusiasm or optimism, as if she was on autopilot by this point. "I...I just want to say thank you, Miyuki, for coming all the way from Sweden to try at least."

Miyuki caught Konata's pessimism and rolled her seat forward and placed her hands on her petite shoulders. "I understand you're scared, Konata-san and that you may have already given up hope, but please, don't. When you give up hope, your body will become weaker and it'll only make it harder for me to help you. Besides, when Kagami-san called me at home and told me what was happening, I couldn't be restrained. I had to come and I wanted to. So please, how about you help me help you?"

"I never expected you to be so up-front and serious with me." Konata replied.

Miyuki smiled again. "This is my job; it's my livelihood. But more than that...this case is very near and dear to my heart, as you and Kagami-san are. I'm taking this very seriously and I won't rest until I cure you, Konata-san."

Konata felt a smile tug at the corners of her mouth and she lifted her hands towards her shoulders and collected Miyuki's hands and held them. The two smiled at each other and Konata allowed Miyuki to work on her. Konata didn't mind it for once when another syringe dove into her flesh and took her blood, mainly because Miyuki was doing it. She took three test tubes worth of blood and took a saliva sample by swabbing a q-tip in Konata's mouth. It still upset Konata that she had to part with more of her hair but still trusted Miyuki and allowed her to take a few more follicles to help find a cure.

As Miyuki continued to take the necessary samples, a nurse knocked on the door and entered. "Um...Izumi-san, there's a very distraught woman outside who wants to see you. She says her name is Yutaka Kobayakawa."

Konata's facial expressions tightened and she sighed with depression. She nodded and replied, "It's okay. She's my cousin so you can let her in."

The nurse nodded and left the hospital examination room. Miyuki barely had time to back away with her hair sample when the examination room door swung open and Yutaka stood in the doorway, shivering and crying. Dressed in professional attire but looked physically exhausted and paler than usual, she quickly rushed in and let her emotions spew as she cried and hugged Konata as tight as she could. She sobbed loudly while Miyuki closed the door again to give them privacy and Konata hugged Yutaka while patting her back.

"Konata...! Please...! Please...don't let this be true...!" Yutaka cried as she looked up, her face a mess of tears and running makeup. "Don't leave us like this!"

"There, there, Yu-chan." Konata said sweetly to her cousin, triggering her to form more tears. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner, but I just didn't want to upset you and I knew you were working in Europe with Tsukasa."

Yutaka nodded and hugged Konata again. "I would've dropped everything anyway! It was a horrible plane ride for us, especially Tsukasa! Her own sister called her to tell her that her father is dead!"

Konata nodded. "I know, I know. It's horrible. Where is Tsukasa anyway?"

Feeling better now that she could hold her cousin, Yutaka backed away and sniffled. "She went back home to see her husband and children. She seemed pretty upset about something else, too. Something about Kagami..."

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There were many reasons why Kagami decided to pass on pursuing a career in criminal law while instead choosing to take the corporation law path. One of the biggest reasons was because when dealing with criminal law, you're dealing with the dirtiest and the worst that society has to offer, but more than that, you have to see and deal with the emotional drama that it creates. For Kagami, walking into a police station, filling out paperwork and having herself and her purse searched for contraband just to see her own mother and to look at her through a glass window only further showed how far from the corporate world she was now.

A police officer guided Kagami through the station until they reached the area where inmates could talk to visitors. Kagami approached one seat, sat down, and waited and eyed the phone hanging on the wall. She admitted that at one point in her life, she did expect to talk to one of her sisters this way for the rest of their lives when she was on her downward spiral. Never in her worst nightmare would she believe that it would be her own mother that would be behind bars, yet Miki Hiiragi was now seen as a cold-blooded murderer.

Kagami waited another five minutes until a police officer on the other side of the glass escorted the ailing Hiiragi woman over to her daughter. When Miki saw Kagami, she couldn't contain herself anymore and she began crying. Kagami followed in sync when she saw her mother wearing an orange jumpsuit with numbers and letters engraved on it.

Miki quickly took her seat and put the phone to her ear as she cried. "Oh, Kagami, you need to get me out of here! You know I didn't murder your father!"

"I know, mom, I know." Kagami said calmly through her tears. "It was Shido."

Miki's eyes shot open. "Ko...Koichi?! But...but he...he...why would he...?"

"Look, mom, I don't have much time here so there are a few things you should know." Kagami said. "Shido isn't the man you think he is...and he isn't the man I thought he was. He's a horrible, conniving parasite that used

me to take over my firm. My associates voted in favor of the Safety Clause and I've been voted out so now he runs my firm. I...I've never felt so...so...dirty...and used...by that...thing."

Watching her daughter's emotions mount until she cried again only devastated Miki further. All her mother's instincts were running wild and all she wanted to do was comfort her daughter and tell her it was going to be okay, but she would be lying. She was stuck behind glass in a jail like a caged animal but that didn't upset her as much as being separated from her Kagami.

"Sweetheart..." was all Miki could muster until she let more tears out.

Kagami cleared her throat. "Look, mom, I know I can't prove it yet, but Shido murdered dad and I promise you that he'll be sitting in your spot soon enough and you'll be free. You're just going to have to give me more time."

"Please hurry, Kagami." Miki wailed. "They...they...they said that I...that I won't even...to be able to attend...your father's funeral!"

Kagami's face scrunched and her physical emotions confirmed this for Miki as Kagami slowly lifted her hand and placed it against the glass. Miki's trembling body mimicked her daughter's movements and placed her hand on the glass, trying to connect it with Kagami's. They didn't say another word to each other after that. They just continued to stare into each other's broken eyes while trying to feel each other's warmth through the cold glass. Kagami wanted to tell her mother that she was in love with someone...but didn't know how her mother would react. Her husband was dead and she

feared that coming out as a lesbian would only add to her ailing mother's stress.

After her visit, Kagami stumbled into the parking lot of the police station. She didn't know where to go after that horrible ordeal. She couldn't go to her job because as of yesterday, she didn't have a job. She could go back to her empty apartment and wait for Konata to come back, but she would only bring more uncertainties with her. No matter where she went, Kagami decided she needed some alone time and she wanted to go to a place where she felt safe and knew one place to go.

Her drive was shorter than she expected, mainly because she was barely paying attention. This was too much for her and when she felt her sanctuary getting closer, she felt more at ease. When she finally saw the house where she and her sisters grew up, a sense of relief fell upon her and Kagami exited her car when she was able to stop.

Opening the door and stepping into the silent structure, she reveled in the tranquility. Little did she know that she wasn't alone in the house. Someone else was in there with her but she was oblivious to this as Kagami's brain went on autopilot and took her up the stairs to her old bedroom. She opened her bedroom door and the memories of it rushed back as she entered the vacant spare room. All of her possessions were gone, either sold, donated, or with her at her apartment. Boxes of toys now occupied her room that belonged to Aito and Kiyora and Kagami slowly walked to the window.

Looking out and observing the backyard, she allowed some of the memories to come back to her in the silence. She remembered when she and her sisters would run and play with each other in that backyard, as well as at the shrine. This place used to be symbolic of everything that

represented innocence and adolescence, but that all changed one New Years Eve and it seemed to only go downhill from there. Kagami lowered her head in depression as the memories echoed in her mind.

She suddenly heard footsteps outside the closed door she had her back to and she assumed it was Matsuri. She was never too far away from the shrine or her parents' home and wasn't startled when her bedroom door opened and another human walked in and closed the door behind them.

"Is that you, Matsuri? I went to see mom in jail. You know if you can believe it, the biggest thing she was upset about was that she's not allowed to go to dad's funeral. I'm assuming you'll lead the ceremony now." Kagami said as she continued to stare out her window and the figure behind her remained silent. A few quiet seconds passed until Kagami became angry. "So I guess you're not going to talk to me now, right? You probably blame me for all of this...don't you? You do so you don't have to say it. I know what you're thinking; if I never went out with Shido and I never allowed myself to become his, none of this would've happened. Dad would still be alive, the kids wouldn't hate me, and maybe I would still be single and not bringing shame to you or the family. That's all I'm good for, isn't it?! Just bringing shame! Go on, yell at me, scream at me! Hate me! I already do! If you want to see me upset, all you have to do is wait less than two months because Konata will be...will be..."

Kagami paused to keep herself together while the figure behind her remained silent. The outburst drained Kagami and she became more relaxed as she continued.

"Look...I know that Aito and Kiyora are very confused and scared of me. You should keep them away from me from now on. It'll probably be better

for them." Kagami finished.

The figure behind her stayed silent until her voice said, "I don't think their mother would agree with you, sis."

The voice entered Kagami's ears and when the familiarity registered in her head, her head jolted up and she slowly turned. When her eyes met the figure, her vision became blurry with rising water.

Tsukasa. The youngest yet strongest and bravest of the Hiiragi daughters stood before Kagami, just as beautiful and magnificent as ever. Her hair was still long and reached to the back of her shoulders while Tsukasa stared at Kagami with a serious and stern expression on her face, something that was rare for her.

More silence fell between them until Kagami slowly approached her little sister with her trembling hands outstretched. She could barely contain herself but when she felt Tsukasa's physical presence and knew this wasn't a dream, Kagami pulled Tsukasa tight and hugged, letting a tear slip from her eyes.

"Tsukasa...you're home..." Kagami whispered.

Tsukasa hugged her older sister and gently rubbed Kagami's head. "Yes, Kagami, I'm home. I'm home...and I hear there are a few things we need to talk about. I heard you have a new love in your life."

Kagami nodded quickly. "Please...don't hate me. I never knew it would hurt your children as much as it has...but Shido...he...he..."

Tsukasa gently pushed her sister back. "Enough, Kagami. You've said all you needed, now, let me say what I need to say. I spent the last nineteen hours on a plane thinking of nothing but dad so you owe me that much."

Kagami gulped and nodded.

"Now first off, if you ever ask me not to hate you again, I will slap you across your face." Tsukasa's opening statement shocked Kagami deeply, not just because of the words used, but also the tone that was used. "Kagami... you're my sister, my best friend. For you to even think such animosity could exist between us is nothing short of an insult to me and you. Second, you have to promise me right now that you will always be a part of my children's lives, no matter what happens from here on out and no matter what they may say or think. You may not believe it, but they need you now more than ever and they'll need you here to explain why you're in this relationship with Konata. They need to know that their Aunt Kagami is still their Aunt Kagami."

Quickly nodding, Kagami also added, "So...what do you think?"

Tsukasa's stern look tightened. "Didn't you hear a word I just said, sis?"

Seeing this hardness in Tsukasa continued to mystify Kagami as she stuttered as her only response.

"Like I said, you're my sister and my best friend, Kagami. Your happiness is the only thing I've ever cared about. I'm more than happy that you've made this decision for yourself and to invite Konata into our family. So my next question is this: what are you going to do about Shido?" Tsukasa asked. "He has something that rightfully belongs to you so what are you going to do about it?"

Kagami looked away. "I don't know what I can do. I created the Safety Clause myself so I was my own undoing because I made the clause airtight."

"So if it's airtight that means it's automatically a lost cause, right? You might as well pack it all in now and wear a white flag for the rest of your life." Tsukasa quickly replied coldly and with deep sarcasm as she folded her arms across her chest.

Giving her confused and bewildered looks, Kagami stuttered again as she didn't know what to make of this stern personality of Tsukasa's. "He stole my law firm from me! My work, my sweat, my tears!"

"Seventeen years ago four men stole my virginity and many other things from me." Tsukasa quickly countered while keeping her arms folded across her chest, still in a deep and stern voice that was even beginning to scare Kagami. "You know more than anyone that that was nearly the death of

both of us. Why are you letting one sneaky piece of shit break you down? This isn't you, sis. What happened to you since I've been gone?"

Tsukasa knew she struck a nerve when Kagami's knees quaked and she slowly slumped to the floor and sobbed. "I...I just wanted a normal life... like you, and Inori. I wanted to be happy with someone in my life like you, Tsukasa. I even wanted to bear children and feel the joys that our mother, that you, and that Inori feel everyday when they rush in and say they love you and they actually mean it. I opened my heart to that asshole. I thought that maybe...he could've been the one...but then I realized I wasn't in love with him...or any other man. I love Konata. I was so weak that I couldn't see it for myself and—"

Kagami's teary rant was silenced when Tsukasa bent down to her and covered her mouth with her single index finger, catching her by surprise. With her stern face still fixed, Tsukasa replied, "Don't finish that sentence, Kagami. If what I experienced that New Years Eve and the months that followed has taught me anything, it's that we are truly blessed...and that you are truly the greatest human being that the gods have placed on this Earth."

Kagami formed another surprised look as Tsukasa pulled her finger away from her lips and continued.

"You were there for me, sis, when nobody else was. Matsuri hated me, dad wanted to send me away, and mom and Inori were scared to death of me. You on the other hand showed a strength that not even I knew existed and you stood tall for me...and against me when you needed to." Tsukasa ranted. "You have a strength deep within yourself that I've always admired and that I've always envied and desired. It was your strength and your

"Are you ready, Konata-san?" Miyuki asked as she held a large needle and observed Konata curled in the fetal position on a hospital bed, shirtless though covered with a sheet with her lower back exposed and covered with a coating of iodine.

Konata tightened her grip on her cousin's hand to relief the stress of the giant needle that was about to enter her spine. "Yes...do it."

Yutaka held Konata's hand with concern and glanced at Miyuki who covered her face with a surgical mask and lowered herself and the large and thick needle closer to Konata's back. Miyuki made her final approach by saying, "Okay...here it comes."

Miyuki took one final deep breath and placed the tip of the needle against Konata's skin and pushed it in and into her spine. The pain was mild but she could still feel the large metal needle entering her back and begin to collect the fluid that could help Miyuki find a cure for her disease. Konata tightened her grip on Yutaka's hand to show her rising fear as the strange sensations continued to pulsate in her lower back.

Miyuki held a collection tube under the needle's back as the clear liquid began to approach. Using all the years of medical training, Miyuki was able to successfully collect samples of Konata's cerebrospinal fluid. Using the same careful precautions, Miyuki slowly withdrew the large needle from Konata's back and the blue-haired woman began to breathe sighs of relief.

"You did great, Konata." Yutaka whispered happily and quickly turned away to release a cough.

"Are you okay, Yutaka?" Konata asked as she remained still until Miyuki told her she could move again.

Yutaka turned back and nodded happily. "Yes, I'm fine. I think I'm just coming down with a cold. I haven't had one of those in awhile."

Konata smiled and nodded. "I understand and thanks for getting through this lumbar puncture."

"Well you should thank Miyuki for that. There's no way I would've been able to do something like that on another person let alone my own cousin." Yutaka said with a blush and admiration for Miyuki.

Miyuki smiled as she took her gloves off. "Well if you're going to thank someone, thank my training. That's why I can do all of these procedures without fear."

Before Yutaka could respond, she quickly turned her head again and coughed a few more times.

"Are you sure you're okay, Yutaka? That sounds like some pretty nasty coughs." Konata added, still curled in the fetal position.

"Well, I have been feeling a little strange lately. I've been having a few sleepless nights and when I could sleep, I would wake up sweaty and sometimes it was hard to breathe." Yutaka replied as she coughed again.

"I can give you an exam when we're done with your cousin." Miyuki replied happily as she began to wipe the iodine off Konata's back.

"Thanks, Miyuki, but that's really not necessary." Yutaka added. "I'd hate to be a burden and the real patient is Konata."

Yutaka turned away and began to cough again and walked away so Miyuki could talk with Konata. Miyuki finished wiping the iodine off her back and said, "You did great, Konata-san. I know that those giant needles can be very scary but you did better than most men do. I remember this one bodybuilder needed an LP and it made him weep like a newborn."

Konata and Miyuki giggled together until Yutaka approached them again and interrupted, "Um...Miyuki...should I be worried about this?"

Konata and Miyuki looked at Yutaka and time suddenly froze. The world came to a screeching halt and their hearts leaped into their throats when they saw Yutaka's hand covered in blood and the red liquid covering her mouth and chin. Konata's eyes filled with tears while Miyuki quickly covered her mouth in shock and horror. While Yutaka continued to stare at them, Konata only had one thought on her mind.

Oh god, please god no.

CHAPTER 13

Even though his insidious plots had worked and he was now running the show, Koichi Shido was not happy. When news of Kagami's job loss reached the rest of the attorney community, questions were beginning to be asked and Shido started to find himself in the crosshairs of people suspecting him of corruption. Shido realized he may have a problem on his hands when calls from the United States started reaching "his" office regarding Kagami's status. It seemed that she made friends overseas during her graduate internship that weren't happy with Shido's management styles.

Feeling the stress as he walked out of a board meeting, he began to feel his associates' eyes burn on him with questionable intentions. He could see it in their eyes and knew they were asking themselves if they made a mistake by voting Kagami out. Ever since she left, their phones had been flooded with calls of concern demanding explanations to why Kagami was forced out. Even though Kagami was still far from achieving her dream of becoming the most influential lawyer in Asia, she was still well-known in Japan and even by the right people across the ocean in America.

He finally made it back to the office where Ayano continued to type on her computer and when she looked up, she quickly looked away. Shido approached her as his cell phone began ringing for the fifth time over the past hour and as he groaned, he barked, "Minegishi, get me some coffee."

She quickly nodded as he answered his phone and entered the office. As Shido closed the door behind him, Ayano had a few thoughts to herself as she grinned.

Certainly, Shido-sama. You like your coffee filled with urine, right? Because that's exactly how you're going to get it. Oh, and by the way, you have a visitor. I let her wait inside your office.

Shido entered his office and looked around the empty room as he talked. "No, sir, I had no choice. I had to let her go. Kagami was having serious issues in her family and I couldn't afford the bad publicity."

An angry voice replied quickly on the other side.

"What do you mean you don't believe that Kagami's mother is a murderer?" Shido asked and became nervous as he looked around his empty office again, feeling paranoid. He looked at his desk and saw his big chair turned so the back of it was facing him. "Sir I wish I could say I agree with you but I cannot argue with the findings of our police. I do not know how the police handle matters such as this in your country, but I for one have the fullest confidence in my men and women in uniform. I also do not believe that arguing this issue with you will resolve any of our differences. Kagami may be gone, but I'm still willing to cooperate with your firms in the states."

The angry voice calling from America continued to rant loudly.

"Well I'm sorry you feel that way. I can only speak the truth and assure you that I am just as, if not more, competent and skilled than Kagami was and we have to face reality and admit that Kagami has lost her edge." Shido replied. "If you change your mind and wish to continue this international partnership, you have my number."

Shido abruptly hung up his phone and wanted to throw it in sheer anger. He growled to himself as he walked towards the windows that allowed him to oversee the Tokyo skyline. To think that kicking Kagami out was almost too easy, but now Shido was starting to see the strings attached. One thing he couldn't kick out was the impression that Kagami left on people across Japan and the world. People from all walks of life connected with this young woman and were outraged that she was being forced from her own firm.

"These damn maggots...do they have any idea who they're talking to?" Shido asked out loud in frustration. "I'll never understand what they see in that little Hiiragi bitch. I'm the one with the connections, I'm the one with the influence and now, I'm the one with the power."

Suddenly, a new voice announced itself in his office that nearly made him jump when it said, "Well perhaps it's not about power and connections. Maybe it has something to do with people and the way you treat them."

Shido quickly looked for the source of the female's voice and he realized it came from his chair. Before he could respond, the back of the chair slowly began to turn and his eyes went wide when he saw Tsukasa sitting in his chair with a look he'd never seen on her before. She wasn't angry but at the same time wasn't happy either. It was a stern and serious look that was bordering on angry as she sat with her legs crossed in his chair while

holding something. Upon closer observation, Shido saw she was holding a glass plaque that meant a lot to him. It was an award for academic achievement from his university with his name in it and list of accomplishments.

Surprised and angered to see her sitting in his chair, Shido quickly opened with, "What the hell are you doing in my office?!"

Seeing that his angry voice didn't faze the once docile Hiiragi twin confused Shido as Tsukasa glared at him. "I should be asking you the same thing. Only I would replace that 'my' with 'Kagami's'."

Something was different about this Tsukasa. This wasn't the once complacent woman that he met after she visited from America during another fashion show and sit-down interview. Shido took a deep breath and grinned sarcastically as he replied, "Tsukasa Hiiragi. Back from touring the world, I see."

"And you, out from under your rock, I see. And that's Tsukasa Shiraishi to you. I'm a happily married woman after all." Tsukasa replied as she held the glass plaque in her hands while sitting. "I'm home because I heard initially that my assistant's cousin is sick...but imagine my dismay when I was stuck on a plane and my sister called me to tell me my father is dead."

Shido squinted at Tsukasa. He feared that she was on to him but continued to play along. "You have my condolences. It's never easy to lose a loved one."

"Clearly...which is why I see you're utterly devastated by losing my sister as your lover and your fellow lawyer." Tsukasa quickly replied again with sarcasm, as if she knew Shido's every response. "If it was the average man, I believe that they would be on the floor crying like a baby if they had to lose Kagami as a lover...but then again you're not an average man, are you Shido? I believe you're something else."

Shido rolled his eyes. "You think I wanted it to end with Kagami like that? I didn't, but I need to keep professionalism in mind and let's face it; your family is broken. But I'll still give your mother some benefit of the doubt. Maybe her poisoning your father was an accident."

Tsukasa's glare tightened upon hearing the sarcasm in Shido's last sentence. What she did next convinced Shido that he was up against a new personality when he saw Tsukasa hold his plaque in one hand and slowly guide it to the side of the chair and she held it high in the air. She suddenly let go and the glass award fell and upon its impact on the floor, it shattered into thousands of pieces and they scattered in every direction. Shido was deeply angered by the gesture as he gritted his teeth.

"Oops...another accident." Tsukasa replied coldly, keeping her glare.

"You worthless cunt!" Shido exclaimed as he clenched his fists at his sides.

Tsukasa's reaction was to only look at Shido's desk and make another perceptive observation. "You shouldn't be too upset, Shido. It's not like you don't have any other awards here on your desk or on your wall."

She was indeed correct. Shido had countless awards and degrees either on his desk or on his wall but the tall corrupt man didn't understand where Tsukasa was going with this. "What's your point?"

"One thing I noticed about your desk is that you have no picture frames. No pictures of loved ones. No mother, no father, siblings...not even one of Kagami, the woman you supposedly loved." Tsukasa said as she shifted her eyes around Shido's desk. "Whenever I toured the world, I always made it a priority to take family pictures with me. Perhaps the American man you were talking to on the phone was trying to make the same point I am. You believe that all these awards, all these degrees, all this influence is your key to the world...but it's not, Shido. No matter what you do, Kagami will always be the better lawyer and the better person because her philosophy doesn't revolve around awards or material possessions that dictate status. Her philosophy revolves around people. Kagami is a citizen of the world and an ambassador for all humanity and all that is good. Someone who knows that underneath every exterior and below every culture and language, we're all the same inside and it was this thinking that won her many friends. You think that awards and degrees give you leverage over connecting with people? It's that thinking that has made you alone, Shido, and exposed."

For the first time, Shido's knees began to tremble. He felt a chill run down his spine and sweat began to form across his head. Worst of all, Tsukasa's words made him feel like a hollowed shell. Someone that could break like his shattered glass plaque if someone poked him hard enough. Worst of all, this aggressive offense didn't come from the hardnosed Kagami; it came from her once air-headed and timid sister. The same one that suffered a horrific fate that left her scarred but not out.

Trying to build himself back up, Shido fixed his black tie as his coping skill and retorted. "Big talk coming from such a little lady. Especially coming

from the same little lady coming from a religious family that decided to fornicate with four men in a holy building."

To his surprise, Tsukasa's exterior remained unchanged and she wasn't fazed by the boorish comment. Her only response was to slowly push back from the desk and slowly rise from his chair. "I wouldn't say fornicated. I would say raped...but don't worry, I made peace with that night many years ago. You can say whatever you want about that night to try and crawl inside my head like the rat you are, but you'll find it quite impossible."

Shido watched her slowly walk to his wall, barely acknowledging his existence. The man was much taller and physically stronger than Tsukasa, yet this once docile woman clearly showed no fear. Tsukasa eyed one of Shido's many degrees as she continued her brutish retorts, still not keeping an eye on him.

"If you're still obsessed with trying to get at me mentally, I'll even help you get started. You could say something around the lines of that I'm a filthy slut that probably enjoyed what happened to me...maybe even begged them to penetrate me. I could also have a crazy and freaky sex life with my husband." Tsukasa's strong tone only further baffled Shido's retorting ability. She lifted a hand up and using only her index finger, she began to slide the hanging degree upward. "Try if you will to put me in mental hell, but I must warn you Shido, I've been there before and after escaping from it...there is absolutely nothing in this world that I'm afraid of. Not of being raped again and definitely not of a spineless, cowardly man whose greed knows no boundary."

Feeling more exposed, Shido leered at Tsukasa and quickly tried to cover his rising intimidation by saying, "You never answered my question,

Tsukasa. Why are you here?"

The degree hanging on the wall suddenly slipped off its hanger and fell to the floor. Upon its impact, the frame broke and allowed the degree to fall out, only furthering Shido's anger as Tsukasa turned to him. "I'm here because of my job, Shido."

"Your...your job?" Shido asked with confusion. "What are you trying to do, sell me a dress or a frock?"

Tsukasa's face remained unchanged as she continued to glare. "Clever...but no. If my fans and supporters saw you in one of my dresses, it would be the death of my career. I'm here because of my other and most important job of all...as a mother. It seems to me that you've been trying to get into my sis's head through her own niece and nephew. My two babies that I carried for nine months each and gave birth to. How despicable."

Shido rolled his eyes and smiled. "Oh I get it now. You're just upset because I was able to corrupt your little bastards into seeing your sister's true colors. What would your father say if he was alive and saw Kagami lying down with another woman?"

"He would be proud of her. He would be proud that Kagami had found true love and that she found someone who makes her happy and would do anything for her and vice-versa. That's a relationship, Shido. A true relationship. My father was smart enough to know that religion is many things but at the end of the day it's only faith and nothing more. His own flesh and blood however...that's a whole new concept and her happiness is

what would matter the most to him." Tsukasa replied, still unfazed and still glaring. "Still...do you have any idea how hard it was to convince Aito that his Aunt Kagami still loves him? You have no respect for the innocent mind of a child. What would your mother say, Shido?"

"You're beginning to piss me off, Tsukasa." Shido replied quickly and he began to crack his knuckles and approach Tsukasa. "I think I'm going to have to teach you a lesson the same way I had to teach your pathetic sister every night. I might even have to bend you over this desk while I'm at it so hold still while I—"

It was as quick as lightning. As Shido made his final approach on Tsukasa, she quickly grabbed him by his black tie and reeled him in like a fish to her height. She suddenly followed it up with a brutish and violent slap across his face that echoed across the room which to his sudden surprise was so hard, it knocked him off balance. As he tried to regain his footing, he tripped on his own heel and fell to the floor.

When he looked up, Tsukasa was still standing above him and holding him by the tie like a dog on a leash. Standing above him with her glare still sealed on her face, Tsukasa said, "Somehow I cannot help but feel a bit of karma has found you, Shido."

"You...you...you little cunt..." Shido whispered through the blood on his lip as his facial muscles twitched in anger.

Tsukasa slowly bent down to him, their faces only inches apart. "Sticks and stones, Shido. Sound familiar?"

Shido could see it in Tsukasa's eyes. She was honestly telling the truth when she said she wasn't afraid of him and this unexpected action proved it. Not knowing what to do, Shido's quizzical personality surfaced when he asked, "When did you start wearing your ovaries on the outside?"

"Good question and the answer is simple. When I became a mother." Tsukasa replied through her angry expression. "When someone sticks it inside you and knocks you up, then you'll understand the rage and the sentiments I feel when someone uses my babies like you have."

Feeling defeated and wanting to stand again Shido replied, "Get out of here."

Tsukasa held her grip on the tie as she slowly stood again. "Consider this your first, last, and only warning you'll get from me. I'm going to be staying home for awhile to be with my kids so if I ever see you near them again... this tie will become your noose."

She abruptly released Shido from her grip and turned to walk out of the office. Leaving the stunned and shaking Shido on the floor, Tsukasa closed the door behind her as Ayano looked up.

"I...I thought you were going to destroy him." Ayano whispered.

Tsukasa slowly shook her head while keeping her stern expression. "I'm going to step aside and let Kagami be responsible for that."

Ayano cracked a grin as she watched Tsukasa walk out of the law firm building without an enlarged ego even though she had bragging rights to do so. Her mother's intuition and desire to keep setting good examples wouldn't let her be selfish as she exited the building as casually as she entered despite the events that unfolded.

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The next day's weather took a darker turn as the clouds and rained moved in. Today was the day of the funeral for Tadao Hiiragi. The weather was a perfect symbolic image of how everyone in not only the Hiiragi family felt, but also how most of Saitama felt. Ever since news of his death reached the public, outcries of sympathy, condolences, and even gifts were sent to the shrine. Bundles of flowers surrounded the Hiiragi shrine from sympathizers who Tadao had helped through spirituality over the years, as well as messages of thanks and gratitude for his help.

It was bad enough that Tadao was gone, but Kagami felt that she was bearing a heavier load than the rest of the family. Not only was her father dead, but the woman she loved was dying, her mother was locked away in a jail cell, most likely crying her eyes out that she couldn't be there, and now she felt ostracized and shunned by the family with the exception of Tsukasa. When Kagami knew she had to attend the funeral without Konata, it only made her feel more vulnerable and exposed, which didn't do her paranoia any favors either. She knew that Konata had a damn good reason though when she learned of Yutaka's parallel fate.

When Kagami observed herself in her bedroom mirror after completing her wardrobe ensemble, she felt the tears come already. She was dressed in a black conservative dress for occasions like this, but this was her own father after all. It was a struggle to keep herself together mentally but was able to take some comfort in the fact that she wasn't going to be the only one crying as the funeral would progress.

As the rainy skies also continued to cry for Tadao, a large crowd gathered in a cemetery only a few miles from the Hiiragi family's property. With the crowd copying each other in their black attire, they watched Matsuri deliver the first eulogy as she stood beside a closed casket with bundles of flowers resting on top of it.

"My father was Tadao Hiiragi...a simple man...a man of his word. He was the kind of person that each and every one of us strived to be every day. The kind of person that can only see good, no matter how much evil is placed in front of them." Matsuri said to the crowd, also dressed appropriately for the tragic occasion. "I know I speak for all of us when I say we all mourn his unexpected passing under less than exceptional circumstances. However, as we weep today, we should feel both a mixture of sadness...and happiness. Happiness that everyone here was even allowed such an opportunity to know this man. Happy to know that this man did exist...and that there are others like him in this world. Though we should also be sad that he has left us...we should also be happy knowing that even the afterlife has improved greatly by his presence there. I know I also speak for all of us when I say that this thought alone cannot take our sadness away or soften the pain we feel from his departure..."

Kagami watched her older sister deliver the heartfelt eulogy until the stress got to her and she quickly lowered her head to cry. It was a good thing it

was raining because she could disguise her numerous tears as rainwater running down her face. She couldn't help but look around at all the mourners that were mimicking her emotions and her eyes eventually drifted to her other family members.

She saw Tsukasa sitting in a chair, also wearing a black conservative dress while holding the crying Kiyora in her arms and rocking her gently while patting her back. Tsukasa's former yellow ribbon that once sat in her hair as a child and teenager was still tied in Kiyora's hair in the same style. Kagami could see Tsukasa whisper to Kiyora every now and then which would calm her down, but only temporarily. Minoru stood holding an umbrella with one hand while his other rested on the shoulder of his crying son.

Kagami's heart suddenly went into hyper-drive when Aito's eyes slowly shifted away from the flower-covered casket and over to her. Her instincts kicked in and she quickly gave a small but still sincere smile of love towards him and nodded once. She felt disheartened when the young boy looked away again without giving any reaction, but Kagami could see something else in the boy's face. He was confused and sad at the same time at why all of this was happening.

At least he didn't glare at me. That's progress...I guess.

Kagami shifted her eyes again and saw her oldest sister Inori holding her sleeping son against her chest as her husband stood next to her holding the umbrella over her and the sleeping child. The twin-tailed Hiiragi woman couldn't help but smile sincerely as she looked at Inori's husband as he stood with quiet dignity in the rain while making sure his wife and son were kept dry. He was a good man. Kagami's only regret upon seeing the scene

was that Konata couldn't be with her at Tadao's funeral to keep her warm on the inside.

"And so we say goodbye to Tadao Hiiragi...a man of many traits and talents. By far his greatest talent was his humanity. May his soul continue to bless us and keep us...and may it forever live within all of us." Matsuri finished the service and everyone bowed as a show of respect. Silence engulfed the cemetery; the only audible noise was the endless pitter-patter of the falling rain.

After the service, friends of the Hiiragi family continued to give their support by staying over at their house for a few hours, continuing to flatter them on how good of a man Tadao was. They didn't say this to each other, but every Hiiragi family member noticed that none of the mourners mentioned Miki once. The stigma of a murder case continued to plague the family but they were still grateful that people came out to pay their respects.

Despite their gratitude, the Hiiragi family was relieved when all the mourners finally left their home and they only had each other. As time continued to turn, it wasn't until later that night that a sense of normalcy finally returned to the household. By that time however, Tsukasa and Minoru were taking their children home. Tsukasa still carried her daughter as Kiyora let a fresh tear slip every now and then.

When Tsukasa said goodnight to her sisters, she turned and saw Minoru waiting for her. With Kiyora still crying lightly on her shoulder, Tsukasa approached Minoru and allowed him to whisper, "Aito's still upset about Shido."

Tsukasa sighed lightly and nodded. She walked into the living room, where she saw her son sitting on the sofa with a hurt expression on his face. Tsukasa approached him while still carrying Kiyora and stopped in front of him and waited. She waited until Aito slowly looked up and Tsukasa could see the hurt in his eyes, which only burned her on the inside. She knew that Aito was still taking the news hard when she sat him down the previous day and did her best to convince him that Shido was a bad man and not to be trusted. It was still hard for him to digest and he didn't admit it, but Aito felt bad about how he treated his Aunt Kagami.

Tsukasa sighed when Aito averted his eyes from his mother. The mother's only response she could muster was, "There's...there's a lot of ugly things in this world, Aito. I wish I could keep them all away from you and your sister forever...but it's just not possible. You know I love you, right?"

Aito nodded. "Yes, mama."

"And you know that your Aunt Kagami loves you, too, right?"

Aito hesitated at first but soon replied, "Yes, mama."

Tsukasa nodded and began to walk towards the house's exit while carrying her daughter as Minoru followed. He rustled his son's hair and helped him up while leading him behind Tsukasa and keeping a hand on his shoulder.

Kiyora finally stopped crying long enough to simply look up at her mother and ask, "Are you going to stay home with us now, mommy?"

Tsukasa froze in her footsteps and tried to keep herself together. She didn't give Kiyora a response. Her only reassurance was a kiss on her daughter's forehead and a few more pats on her back which soothed the distraught child as Minoru and Aito continued to follow Tsukasa.

Kagami however sat at the dinner table, a cup of steaming tea sitting in front of her. She rested her head in her open palm as her elbow sat on the table. Staring at the steam rising from the hot beverage, Kagami could only think about all the precious memories she had with her father. While Tsukasa bonded with Miki, Kagami always gravitated towards Tadao and it was through him where she learned maturity.

Matsuri suddenly took a seat next to Kagami, also with a cup of tea in her hands. A long and painful silence engulfed them until Kagami sighed and said, "Good service, Matsuri. Dad would be proud."

Matsuri nodded. "Thanks, Kagami. That means a lot."

Another long pause swallowed them and Kagami knew what this was about. Her family was still digesting the fact that Kagami was in a serious and committed relationship with another woman. While Tsukasa accepted it with open arms, Matsuri and Inori were still reluctant, not out of disgust or shame, but more so out of shock. Sure, Kagami always had masculine traits but this was still their sister. The girl they remember playing with as kids and sharing so many precious memories with. They still loved Kagami and everything, but it was still awkward at first upon breaking the news.

"I know what you're thinking, Matsuri." Kagami said as she stared at the steaming liquid. "You're thinking about what I told you and Inori the other day. About me and Konata."

Matsuri breathed deeply. "Look, Kagami, I...I...it just came as a shock. That's all."

Kagami nodded. "I understand. It did for me, too. You should've seen the look on Konata's cousin when I kissed her in front of her."

Matsuri huffed but it was only half sincere. "Look, I know we've had our differences in the past and we took two completely different paths in life, but I'm not going to sit here and condemn you or Konata. I trust your judgment and you're still my sister. If you think that I don't love you anymore then you're crazy."

Kagami smiled. "Thank you, Matsuri. Would you do a huge favor for me?"

Matsuri nodded.

"Pray for me. Pray that I'll be able to get through the days ahead. Konata and Yutaka are dying but I still haven't given up hope for either of them. And pray to give me the strength to take back what's mine." Kagami snorted angrily at her last request. "Something tells me I'll need all the strength I can get."

Feeling the mounting stress of the job she had signed up for, Miyuki sat alone and isolated from the outside world in a lab room in the hospital with not only samples from Konata, but now Yutaka. It was devastating for the two cousins and even for Miyuki to read the test results saying that Yutaka tested positive for the same disease that was killing Konata and she too was now running out of time. Miyuki already ran a few tests with some of the blood samples and was reading over the results as she sat at a table. Feeling confused by the results, she lifted a tape recorder to her mouth and pressed the record button.

Miyuki stopped recording her voice and leaned forward and placed her tape recorder on the table. She exhaled bluntly while rubbing her eyes and scanned the numerous pieces of paper scattered across the table, searching for anything to go on. All she had at this point was that it was something genetic and it seemed to be reacting differently in each patient. The biggest question in Miyuki's mind was why Yutaka was different from Konata. They were both cousins and even had the same blood type so there was obviously something different about the two women.

"I have every piece of the puzzle, yet somehow I'm still missing something." Miyuki said to herself. "I even have Yutaka-san's medical history in front of me and yet..."

Something suddenly came to Miyuki.

"Wait a minute...back in our high school days, Konata-san was very athletic despite her sedentary lifestyle. Come to think of it, I never saw her workout except during P.E. classes yet she was so athletic." Miyuki said out loud to herself as her way of thinking and working out problems in her mind. "Yutaka-san on the other hand had very poor athletic skills even though they were the same body type and height while also maintaining similar lifestyles. Could it be?"

Miyuki quickly snatched Yutaka's file and began to page through the lengthy collection of medical history documents. She started at the beginning with Yutaka's first entry. It was brief but it still held a clue and Miyuki took Konata's medical history and compared the first two entries. They were the exact same age and admitted for the exact same thing.

Forming a smile, Miyuki held the tape recorder to her mouth again and pressed record. "Entry number five...I think I'm on to something."

As Miyuki continued to work her medical magic, Konata was dealt a more stringent responsibility; that of comforting Yutaka. Ever since she got her diagnosis, Yutaka never stopped crying and it only got worse when she felt her first of many fevers come. The two cousins sat side-by-side with each

other in the hospital, Yutaka covering her face as she sobbed while Konata rubbed the ailing woman's head.

What an impossible situation the two family members found themselves in. In the beginning, it all started with Konata missing Kagami as a friend. When Konata received her death sentence, it was then that she was truly able to admit her feelings for Kagami and her dreams came true when Kagami admitted it to her too and they could sleep together. Konata and Kagami just became a couple and now it seemed they were going to lose each other in the tragic game called life.

Yutaka had just reunited with her cousin for the first time in nearly two years and now she too was suffering the same fate. Worst of all, she still hadn't told Yui either and after the display she showed for Konata's news, one could only imagine what her reaction would be with regards to her own little sister.

As Yutaka continued to sob, Konata's phone began to ring and when she saw the number on her screen, she was able to form a smile. She excused herself and when she was out of hearing range of Yutaka, she answered the phone, picking up a sneaky but thoughtful habit from her girlfriend.

"Hey, thanks for getting back to me so soon, especially since this is the first time we've talked in a long time." Konata said.

The voice on the other side replied quickly and with detectable fear.

Konata nodded. "Yes, I'm afraid my voicemail was true. Yutaka isn't doing so well and this time it's very serious. It means the world to me that you're doing this for her and it will for her the most. So you'll start your position here tomorrow?"

The voice replied.

Konata smiled. "Sounds great. I'll see you tomorrow, Minami-san."

She hung up the phone.

CHAPTER 14

Because of Yutaka's history of a weak and frail constitution, her immune system didn't stand a chance when the first of her many fevers to come struck her body. Her weakened condition hindered her from being able to function unlike Konata and she was admitted to the hospital. The burning was intense and there wasn't much the doctors could do except try and keep her as cool as possible, even if the only treatment they could administer was applying cool pouches to her head and body.

Konata stayed with her and she sat next to her, but she didn't look any better. Konata's flushed complexion returned and she looked as pale as a ghost and she was cold again as her chattering teeth illustrated. Sitting in a chair next to Yutaka, Konata quickly looked at her watch and wondered when her special guest for her ailing cousin was going to arrive. With each passing second, Konata's stress raised higher with the events of her

diagnosis, Yutaka's diagnosis, her relationship with Kagami, and the impending arrival of Minami Iwasaki.

"Konata...!" Yutaka cried her cousin's name and squeezed her hand as hard as she could to show the physical pain she was in. "It hurts...! It hurts so much...! What do I do?!"

It took all of Konata's mental abilities to keep herself calm as she continued to see her little cousin thrash and cry in searing pain. Trying to keep her eyes from flooding, Konata quickly cupped Yutaka's squeezing hand and said, "I know, I know it hurts. I'm in the exact same ballpark as you are, Yutaka. I wish I could take your pain away..."

Yutaka suddenly shot her eyes open, releasing more tears and her breathing became deep. Her abdomen began to twitch and Konata knew what was coming next. The dying blue-haired woman quickly grabbed a bedpan and held it in front of Yutaka. She quickly snatched it from her cousin's grasp and vomited relentlessly into it, releasing a new yelp of pain in-between spews. When her vomiting subsided, Konata took the bedpan and put it as far away from them as possible and returned to Yutaka.

"K...Konata...!" Yutaka screamed again as her free hand grabbed her own hair and squeezed in vain attempts to find an outlet from the burning pain. "Please...make it stop...!"

Konata didn't know how to respond to such a simple yet unattainable request. Her facial muscles only contracted and she formed a sad face as she continued to hold Yutaka's hand while she watched the younger woman

grind her teeth in pain. What happened next was something new and it caught Konata completely off guard. At the same time, steady streams of blood began to pour out each of Yutaka's nostrils and ears.

The blue-haired woman panicked and quickly pressed a button near Yutaka's bed calling for help. Several nurses quickly rushed in as Yutaka's heart rate sped up and her vitals began to go haywire as she let out a scream of agony. Miyuki suddenly rushed into the room following the nurses.

"Miyuki what's happening?!" Konata cried.

Miyuki stormed over to Yutaka and used her small flashlight to look in Yutaka's nose and ears. "The fever is putting too much pressure on her brain and its constricting inside her skull. Nurse, I need four milliliters of morphine, stat!"

The nurse complied as Miyuki took out her personal handkerchief and began to wipe the sweat off Yutaka's forehead and even began to use her own mouth to blow cool air onto the crying woman's head. Miyuki's maternal-like presence began to sooth the thrashing Yutaka and Miyuki even began to hum sweetly for her, also aiding in the calming process. When the morphine entered Yutaka's system, her pain subsided though her head continued to burn and she quickly passed out.

While Miyuki continued to mop the endless sweat off Yutaka, Konata approached her. "Miyuki, please tell me you're making progress."

"Well Konata-san, I believe I may be on to something. I read you and your cousin's files all night last night and I believe your first doctor missed something...but only because he didn't know you on a personal level like I do." Miyuki said with a smile, giving Konata hope. "I need you to think back to when you were five years old and you were admitted to a hospital for very serious breathing problems."

Konata tried to search her memory and she vaguely remembered when her father took her to a hospital when she was that age. She didn't remember the hospital visit as much as she did the weekend her dad took her to Comiket for the first time. It was one of her earliest memories and she remembered her distant father became much clingier to her from that point forward.

"I do sort of remember that." Konata said.

"Well, you were admitted for a rare condition that has very similar characteristics of asthma." Miyuki said.

"But...but I don't have asthma." Konata replied with confusion.

"You're right, you don't." Miyuki quickly replied as if she was expecting that response. "When you were little, you were still underdeveloped as a result of inheriting your mother's disease. Consequently, your lungs remained underdeveloped even when you began to grow. Your doctors back then brushed it off as asthma because it's a common occurrence in many people, especially children."

"So?"

"I believe the solution to this disease may be simpler than we thought. Your body just has slower reaction times in every way. Your food digests slower, your kidneys take longer to produce urine, your bones take longer to heal if they break, it takes longer for your lungs to take in air, and so on. When the disease struck your mother, her immune system was too slow to react to fight it off and her body was too slow to recover from the strains of childbirth to aid in triggering the immune system." Miyuki replied as she stood up from Yutaka and slowly turned. "I believe there is a combination of steroids and medications that will be able to speed up you and your cousin's bodily functions. They are numerous and they are complicated but —"

Miyuki froze when she saw Konata's green eyes. They were still sparkling green but it was the whites around them that made Miyuki's heart skip a beat.

"What's wrong?" Konata asked.

Taking her flashlight again, Miyuki raised it to Konata's eyes and said, "Please hold still for a second, Konata-san."

She shined the light on the white's of Konata's eyes and Miyuki knew she was in trouble when she saw them. The once perfect white was now beginning to turn a light yellow, a tell-all sign that Konata's liver was shutting down. If it was something as simple as slow system responses, her liver wouldn't be failing. This was a doctor's worst nightmare to see and Miyuki lowered her flashlight and quickly covered her head with her hand.

"Miyuki...what...?" Konata asked with fear and dreaded the response.

"I'm sorry, Konata-san, but it appears I may have been wrong." Miyuki said with deep remorse. "But that doesn't make sense. Even Yutaka's file said the same thing and your samples are—"

Miyuki paused again as another thought struck her. She suddenly turned and began to walk out of the hospital room. "I'm going to have to biopsy your lungs and Yutaka's liver when she wakes up." Miyuki said with haste.

Before Konata could respond, Miyuki was out of the hospital room and Konata was left alone with her unconscious cousin. She saw the dread on Miyuki's face and knew that this had potentially upsetting results on the end of it. Finding her chair, Konata slowly sat down again and watch sweat run down her cousin's forehead.

The silence in the room continued for five more minutes until Konata heard the doorknob of the hospital room turn and she looked, expecting it to be Miyuki but someone else came in, which satisfied Konata even more. She saw Kagami enter with a bundle of flowers in a vase for Yutaka and Kagami slowly closed the door behind her when she saw Yutaka was asleep. Konata happily stood up and Kagami placed the glass vase on Yutaka's nightstand and hugged her girlfriend and kissed her.

Holding hands, Konata and Kagami looked at the single chair sitting next to Yutaka's bed. "Um...they only left me the one chair." Konata whispered.

Kagami smiled. "That's okay."

Kagami sat in the chair first and opened her arms with a sincere grin on her face, showing a more feminine side that Konata rarely saw. Either way, Konata reveled in it and happily sat in Kagami's lap while Kagami held Konata around her petite shoulders with her right arm while pulling her legs in closer with her left arm. The two lovers sat in the same chair while staring at the sleeping Yutaka and they were complacent with the momentary silence between them.

"How was the funeral?" Konata whispered.

Kagami slowly looked away. "It was a funeral for my father, Konata. I can't exactly say it was a like a rock concert."

Konata nodded. "Sorry...but I bet Matsuri delivered a great service."

Feeling a small smile on her face, Kagami nodded. "She did. She was amazing."

"I'm so sorry again, Kagami. I wish I had the opportunity to know your father at a more personal level now." Konata added as Kagami began to slowly rock the short blue-haired woman.

"I do, too, Konata." Kagami replied with remorse. "How is Yui taking the news about Yutaka?"

"She's not." Konata quickly replied, painting a grim picture of Yui's response of that she might lose her baby sister. "So...any ideas on how you were going to expose Shido as the murderer and get your mother out of jail?"

Kagami's glare tightened. "I still can't prove it...but I got an interesting phone call on my way over here."

Konata slowly looked up.

"I was called by the Board of Directors and I'm to appear in their office later today." Kagami said.

"Board of Directors?"

"They're a panel of five lawyers that head the Japanese Federation of Bar Associations." Kagami replied. "Long story short, they're the ones responsible on deciding who becomes a lawyer and who doesn't after Law School. They want to talk to me about my relationship with you that Shido exposed before he initiated the Safety Clause."

Konata suddenly became concerned. "They know about us? But how?"

"Shido showed the firm a picture of us kissing outside that café after you were released from the hospital." Kagami replied and tightened a glare. "I still don't know where he got that picture...but I have a sinking feeling we have a rat in the nest. A golden haired, blue-eyed rat from the past."

"What are you talking about, Kagami?" Konata asked. "Will this panel take away your license to practice law?"

Kagami hesitated. "I don't know...but I have a feeling they will."

"Why?"

"...Because I'm going to make them."

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Later that day, Kagami sat alone in a large office tower in Tokyo and waited in a very spacious and luxurious office. She felt as if she was in court as she sat at a table and looked forward at a very long and polished brown desk with five empty chairs sitting behind it. The chairs were waiting to be occupied by the five members of the Board of Directors to decide Kagami's fate and whether her career as a lawyer would be permanently terminated.

If it was any other person, they would be shaking uncontrollably because this was a situation that would be considered a living hell for any lawyer. All of their work in high school, college, and Law School was now officially in jeopardy and one single decision could destroy them forever. Kagami however felt differently. She had a vision in her mind of how this was going to play out and it was the end result that was able to keep her smiling inside.

On her lap rested five pieces of paper that were intended for each board member and the pieces of paper contained Kagami's inner thoughts. She had a few conversations in mind for the board as she was about to face the same five men that gave Koichi Shido a license to practice law. However,

she was also facing the same men who also gave Kagami her license to practice law. It was because of this sentiment that made Kagami hope that it wasn't going to have to come to a point where she would have to give the letters on her lap to the board members, but she was still prepared for it to happen regardless.

The large polished doors suddenly opened and Kagami followed board meeting protocol and stood in her business attire as a show of respect while holding the five letters to her side. She waited patiently as the five elderly men took their seats and composed themselves.

"This meeting regarding the issue of ethics and intentions within the workplace will now commence. Will the subject please take her seat again?" The lead member asked after clearing his throat.

Kagami quickly sat and rested the letters back on her lap.

"Defendant today is Kagami Hiiragi. Hiiragi, you have been asked here today as a result of the initiation of the Safety Clause and the unanimous Vote of No Confidence. Those are some very serious occurrences at a firm with as much budding potential as yours, would you agree?" The lead board member asked.

"Yes, sir." She replied politely.

"Now first off, we want to offer our sincerest condolences to you and your family upon the death of your father." Another board member said.

"However, with that being said, we also received disturbing accounts from Koichi Shido and several eyewitnesses that claim that police officers came to your firm and had to subdue you there after making a scene because you have accused Shido of murdering your father. Are these allegations true, Hiiragi?"

"Yes, sir."

"I see. Hiiragi, I'm afraid that you are in deep trouble with all of these occurrences." A third board member said. "Accusing not only a fellow lawyer of a heinous crime but also one of the most distinguished lawyers in our history. On top of that, we have been informed that you are in a homosexual relationship with another woman. Is this also true?"

"Yes, but I fail to see the relevance, sir."

"It is relevant if this relationship is complicating your work environment." A fourth board member added. "As you know, you are a hired representative for many different multi-million dollar corporations that not only serve our great nation, but nations across the world. In essence, you are an indirect influence on the global market, Hiiragi. We cannot allow such drama in our world."

"Am I not allowed to be a homosexual?"

The question instantly made all five of the board members uncomfortable. The final board member took the initiative and said, "We have no grievance

with your lifestyle, Hiiragi. You are a worthwhile contributor to our academic practices and we want you to stay so please keep in mind that this is not about homosexuality as we do not discriminate."

Kiss ass, Kagami thought to herself before vocalizing, "If all of that is true, then what is my true purpose of being here today?"

"We want you to tell us that you are competent enough to keep the title of lawyer and to keep your license to practice law. As you know, we can take it away as fast as we can give it." The lead board member added his voice again. "As you also know, your family has suffered immense heartbreak and we cannot help but wonder if this newfound love and lifestyle with this blue-haired woman is a phase or if it's an expression."

"Phase or expression, sir?"

"From what Koichi Shido has told us, you only began to seek a physical relationship with this woman after your father died." Another member said.

Hearing this angered Kagami deeply as once again Shido was falsifying history and events. Still, she kept her cool and began to issue her responses. "If the board allows it, I would like to say a few things regarding Shido."

The board nodded their heads.

"Did Shido ever mention that we were also in an intimate relationship?" Kagami asked.

The board nodded.

Damn...he's really covering all his tracks.

"Did Shido also mention that he used to hurt me? Did he mention that he would hit me whenever I wouldn't cook him breakfast properly, or if I said no to intercourse with him?" Kagami's detectable anger lifted in her voice.

The board was clearly shocked by these allegations as they exchanged alarmed faces with each other.

"I know that I am not in divorce court or seeking help for Shido. I only ask this board one question. Is it possible that if a man is so easily able to hit and abuse a woman, what makes one believe that the potential of murder is out of the question?" Kagami asked. "Koichi Shido is not the man I thought he was when I hired him and I deeply regret that mistake. Shido has revealed his true colors to me and I must say that he is a traitor to our academic field of study and a monster. You can ask my little sister this as well and she will tell you that he was using her own son and daughter as pawns to try and get them to hate me to try and torment me on the inside. Shido is an evil man and if one is to be called to a meeting with the Board of Directors, it should be him and when it comes to the—"

Kagami was cut off by the lead board member. "Calm yourself, Hiiragi!"

Kagami was surprised by this outlandish outburst.

"Now, I must warn you Hiiragi, you are treading into darker waters and I must advise you to hold your tongue." The lead board member ordered. "We cannot allow such disgusting rhetoric in the sanctity of our chamber."

Something isn't right here. Did Shido get to these men?

"But sir, I—" Kagami began.

"Enough, Hiiragi. You have said all you need to and we will begin our deliberation on whether to allow you to keep your license or for it to be stripped from you." The lead board member said. "And on a more personal level, I believe it would be best for you to break it off with this blue-haired woman. She isn't good for you and being in...this kind...of relationship only shows your immaturity as a person."

That was it. That was the straw that broke the camel's back and Kagami couldn't contain her anger anymore. For anyone to tell her that Konata was bad for her was only inviting all of Hell itself to be unleashed on top of them. She tightened her grip on her five letters.

"Now before we deliberate, we must ask that you submit to us in writing your closing statements." The lead board member said.

To their surprise, Kagami grinned. "I already have, sir."

She approached the large table and handed the five letters to the lead board member, who passed the remaining four to the other members. It didn't take long for them to read and even before they were halfway finished, their facial expressions changed and they became angry. One showed a look of pure disgust while Kagami held a satisfied look on her face.

"What the hell is the meaning of this, Hiiragi?!" The lead member yelled. "I'm praying for your sake that this is some kind of sick joke or a mistake! To make sure this is a mistake, I'm going to read this letter back so you can hear it!"

The lead board member cleared his throat as Kagami held her complacent expression.

"To whom it may concern, my name is Kagami Hiiragi and for the past ten years I have served the Law with upstanding and vigorous enthusiasm. However, in light of recent events and the fact that I know address the same board that enabled a rat like Koichi Shido the privilege of a license to practice law, I cannot help but feel a turn in the tide. My job nowadays consisted of masking my contempt for the overeducated assholes in charge that allowed such living garbage to take away my firm. Now my time as a lawyer is spent at a hospital's bedside and at least once a night, lying down with and pleasuring the loins of the woman who completes me while I also picture a life with her that so doesn't resemble the shit I work in now. I am in love with Konata Izumi and from here on out, she will be my number one

priority while anyone who thinks or judges otherwise can go fuck themselves with a spiked bat. Thank you."

Seeing the satisfied look on Kagami's face triggered the board members to see this wasn't an accident. This statement was obviously boiling inside her for awhile and now she released it.

"Well obviously have no interest in saving yourself, Hiiragi." One of the board members snapped. "I now propose a vote to strip Kagami Hiiragi of formal legal rank and to terminate her license to practice law."

"Before I agree with him, I'll give you one final chance to redeem yourself, Hiiragi." The lead board member said. "What you're doing now is showing us a side that is unprofessional and above all, crazy."

Kagami's smirk deepened. "I am crazy. But that's what being in love will make you; crazy as a motherfucker. Good day, gentlemen."

Kagami quickly turned and began to walk out of the board conference room as the Board of Directors made their final decision. When she left the room, she could barely hear the lead board member say, "The vote is unanimous and Kagami Hiiragi has been stripped of formal rank and will lose her license to practice law effective immediately."

As she continued to walk down the hallway alone, she couldn't help but mutter to herself, "Now that that's done, I have a date with Shido myself. Thank you, Tsukasa, for giving me my strength back."

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Keeping her eyes closed as more tears fell, she whispered, "K...Konata...?"

"I...I think I had an accident." She said with deep regret and embarrassment. "Could...could you call a nurse, please?"

"Sure thing, Yutaka." Konata replied as Yutaka continued to keep her eyes shut and consumed by darkness.

While she waited, she began to put herself on the exact same pity trip that Konata put herself through when her symptoms first began to surface. Why was this happening to her? More than anything, why was she chosen to have such a sickly history? She remembered these patterns and histories of becoming sick kept her from having so many things in life that she wanted. She missed out on having many friends, she missed out on playing as a child and even with a successful career with Tsukasa, she felt that she was a burden whenever she became sick in other countries. Sometimes Tsukasa had to stay with her and she was forced to skip meeting with other fashion contractors that may have cost her more money for her children. Yutaka continued to feel like she was dragging everyone down with her.

The hospital room door opened and she could hear a nurse enter while rolling a cart full of fresh medical supplies. Feeling a cool cloth begin to wipe sweat off her head sent shockwaves of relaxation across Yutaka's body and she felt comforted by this new touch. Yet somehow, something was familiar about this touch. Something about it brought back even more fond memories of high school and all the fun times Yutaka had in it with her friends, one in particular.

"Th...thank you..." Yutaka whispered as she felt her fever begin to break.

The nurse above her remained quiet and began to check the rest of her bed for any more signs of bodily failure. It was a humiliating process for Yutaka to know that she was being examined by another human being but also tried to keep convincing herself of the importance of it. She kept her eyes closed

and to hide herself from the embarrassment, she covered her face with her hands as the nurse finished her exam.

"Well you'll be happy to know that you didn't have an accident, Yutaka." A voice said.

The voice entered Yutaka's ears and when she heard it, it suddenly registered with another person she had known from the past. Someone she treasured deeply from high school and was always there for her in the best and the worst of times. It couldn't be. It had to be a dream or a hallucination brought on by the fever. Yutaka found it a struggle to open her eyes and every time she tried, her head only ached more.

Nevertheless, she continued to pursue until the light of the room blurred her vision and she shifted her tired eyes upward. She saw a figure standing over her...and she saw green. As her vision became clearer, she saw the green turn into hair and the eyes right below the green top were perfect shades of blue. It took a few second for the rest of Yutaka's vision to clear through her tears and when everything became clear, she wanted to cry again.

"M...Minami..." Yutaka whispered.

Minami Iwasaki stood above Yutaka and dressed in her nurse's uniform, as her career now dictated. With a rare and sincere smile coming from Minami and it showing to Yutaka, the tall green-haired woman slowly lowered herself closer to the ailing Yutaka.

"Yes, I'm here now, Yutaka." She whispered.

"But...but how...?" Yutaka whispered.

"Your cousin called me and told me everything." Minami whispered again. "When I heard what was happening, I transferred to this hospital the next day. Today's my first day here and I'm here for you now."

A fresh tear fell from Yutaka's eyes and she lifted her weakened arms up and Minami took it from there. She scooped Yutaka up and held her tight as Yutaka sobbed with happiness. Konata tried to hold herself together as she watched the scene unfold and smiled with satisfaction as Minami sat on Yutaka's bed and cradled the petite woman in her arms. It was a joyous reunion and Yutaka was slowly beginning to feel better about the horrible fate she was sharing with Konata. Was there hope for them?

As the reunion continued to unfold, Miyuki sat in her isolated office with her eyes attached to a microscope's eyepiece that showed extreme close-ups of the cerebrospinal fluid of Konata. When her analysis was complete, she wheeled her chair over to another computer and began typing quickly with test results of Yutaka. Trying desperately to compare the two, she soon found out that her earlier hypothesis was half right and half wrong. Right now it all depended on the future biopsies of the two women's most important organs.

Upon seeing Yutaka's results, Miyuki felt her heart sink. With her hand slowly trembling, she lifted the tape recorder to her mouth and press record. "Entry number eight. The symptoms in both Konata-san and Yutaka-san are

speeding up at alarming rates and the disease has now taken a drastic turn in Konata-san. It's trying to kill her now. The symptoms are showing faster in Yutaka-san, but Konata-san is still dying faster as the disease is now attacking her most vital organs. I need to run a lung biopsy and a liver biopsy...either way...my intuition is telling me it won't be good news."

Miyuki turned off the tape recorder and to her own horror, tears formed in her eyes. As she played out the scenarios in her mind, she couldn't help but whisper to herself, "I don't know if I can save both of them."

A/N: I try my best to keep the whole legal and medical jibber-jabber as dumbed down as possible because I know how boring it can be. Either way, I hope everyone is still enjoying the story and don't be afraid to tell me if the jibber-jabber is too much!

CHAPTER 15

It meant the world for Yutaka that Minami went through such constraints just to be with her, even picking up her career and shifting it to another place. It also deepened her love for Konata, knowing that she was responsible for enabling such a wonderful gift for her cousin to be possible. Despite the fact that Yutaka experienced the same symptoms as Konata but because of her weak body the pain was magnified, she was still able to be cheery and happy because now she had her best friend from high school not only with her, but she was also helping in making her better. Now she knew how Konata felt when she said that with Kagami by her side, she could go in peace knowing that she wouldn't be dying alone. What made this reunion even more special was that Yutaka's symptoms subsided for now and her excruciating fever broke.

As Yutaka continued to rest in her bed, Minami took every break she could to be with her. Minami was able to take her lunch break with Yutaka while Konata left and gave them privacy. Though as Minami ate her lunch with Yutaka sitting next to her, the green-haired woman couldn't help but feel guilty.

"Are you sure it's okay if I eat here, Yutaka? I know Miyuki said you couldn't eat anything for a few hours before or after your biopsy so..." Minami said with concern while she sat in her chair and rested her bento box on her lap.

Yutaka giggled and shook her hands and head. "I'm sure, Minami. You go ahead and enjoy it. I'm just fine with you here. Are you going to keep your promise and stay with me when Miyuki biopsies my liver?"

"Of course." Minami replied quietly with a smile as she began to eat.

"Good...but I am a little scared, though. I heard that it will hurt." Yutaka said with concern and her tightening grip on her bed sheet showed it.

Minami nodded slowly. "I won't lie to you, Yutaka, it will hurt a bit. It'll be pretty more intense than a standard injection because Miyuki has to guide a large rod into your body and slide a special needle in the hollowed rod to collect the sample. But you know this is an important test, right?"

Yutaka nodded. "I know I just don't have a high tolerance for pain...or needles."

Minami giggled. "I know how you feel. Believe it or not, some nurses couldn't take it in training."

"Really?" Yutaka asked with amusement.

"Yes. In fact, one of my fellow nursing students fainted next to me when she had to take blood for the first time." Minami replied with a giggle.

Yutaka mirrored Minami's snicker and the two friends continued to talk for more than an hour. They had so much to talk about but it was mostly Yutaka that continued most of the dialogue while Minami simply sat back and listened with eager ears. Minami didn't care what Yutaka was talking about, whether it was her work with Tsukasa in the fashion industry, traveling around the world, or even something as simple as remembering a memory from high school. It didn't matter to the quiet green-haired woman. Yutaka meant something special to her after all.

All of a sudden, the hospital room door opened and Miyuki entered while rolling a cart of medical supplies, her optimistic smile and charm still attached to her. "I'm sorry I have to break this up, but it's time for that biopsy, Yutaka-san."

Yutaka quickly became tense as she reluctantly laid flat on her back and her breathing intensified. As Miyuki began to set up her supplies, Yutaka made

the mistake of looking at the cart and saw Miyuki pick up a large and hollowed rod that looked like a giant straw with a razor sharp point like a giant needle. Yutaka quickly looked away and whimpered in fear as she felt the cold coating of iodine being rubbed on her soft flesh by her doctor.

Minami quickly took the petite woman's hand and held it close. "Don't worry, you need to trust Miyuki. Do you trust her?"

Yutaka kept her eyes on Minami and slowly smiled. "I do. I trust you, Miyuki."

Miyuki smiled and giggled. "It's okay, Yutaka-san. I'm here for you."

"If you don't mind me asking, what's this test for? Am I in any immediate trouble?" Yutaka's voice suddenly changed and for a second, both Minami and Miyuki heard the sweet and innocent voice of Yutaka when she first started high school. That sweet-sounding voice that sounded like a small glass wind chime that could easily break.

Minami quickly lifted her eyes up and saw something that deeply troubled her. Miyuki's sweet and smiling face suddenly shifted and Minami could see fear. The swirling pools of purple in her eyes were like cyclones of dread and uncertainty as Miyuki readied the large rod to drive it into Yutaka's side. As quick as Miyuki's look of fright came, it was gone and her smile abruptly returned.

"I'm just making sure that nothing else goes wrong and let's just call this a precaution for your vital organs." Miyuki said, though it was only a half truth.

Because of Minami's training in the medical field, she saw right through Miyuki's false logic but knew she wasn't intentionally trying to deceive Yutaka. Her nurse's intuition was telling her that if Miyuki told Yutaka the full truth, it would send the already sickly woman into a panic, thus compromising the rest of her body.

"Oh, okay." Yutaka replied with a smile. "Just try not to hurt me too much, Miyuki."

"I'll do my best." Miyuki added, still with her smile and cheery attitude.

Lying perfectly still on her bed, Yutaka tried to leave her body as Miyuki readied the large rod and Minami squeezed her sickly friend's hand. Feeling the cold steel of the medical instrument intrude into Yutaka's skin made her clench up and she wanted to scream in terror as she felt the metal needle continue to glide into her until it punctured her liver. Miyuki quickly took control of another smaller needle and fed it through the hollowed rod and using surgical precision, clamped onto a piece of the liver and was quickly able to sever it. She slowly retracted the smaller needle containing the sample and slipped it into the test tube.

Yutaka breathed deep sighs of relief when the long rod was finally removed from her body and Miyuki quickly bandaged the lightly bleeding wound.

"There...that wasn't so bad, was it?" Minami asked lovingly as she still gripped Yutaka's sweating hand.

She still shivered from the foreign intrusions but overall it honestly wasn't the worst thing she ever felt. Her fever the previous day was far much worse by comparison. Nevertheless, Yutaka smiled and shook her head. "Thank you for being here, Minami."

Minami smiled and nodded once.

"Okay Yutaka-san, I'm going to have to ask you lie perfectly still for the next hour and breathe normally." Miyuki said as she labeled the sample. "Your body needs time to recover from this biopsy so we don't want any unnecessary stress."

"I understand. Thanks again, Miyuki. You're so kind for coming all this way to help Konata and I. I know you'll cure us." Yutaka's innocent voice said again and Miyuki couldn't help but cringe.

Keeping her performance going, Miyuki smiled again. "Try and get some sleep too, dear."

Yutaka nodded happily and rested herself back on the pillow. As Miyuki took the sample and walked out of the room, Minami noticed another sign coming from her former neighbor. Miyuki was in a quick hurry to get out of the hospital room as the clatter of her shoes indicated and Minami excused herself from Yutaka for a brief moment.

Minami exited Yutaka's room and saw Miyuki continue walking back towards her lab room in the midst of the busy hospital corridors. Something wasn't right. The green-haired woman quickly chased after Miyuki and caught up to her.

"Miyuki, please wait. Tell me, what was all that about?" Minami asked when she finally was able to get Miyuki to stop.

"Why...why whatever do you mean, Minami-san?" She asked politely.

"Please don't play dumb with me, Miyuki. We've been next door neighbors our whole lives and I can tell by now when something is bothering you. Please tell me. Yutaka is my friend too, you know." Minami reared her rare assertive and vocal side.

Instinctively, Miyuki quickly looked around, as if she was afraid that someone was going to be listening to her. Minami then knew that it truly was serious as no one in the hospital knew who Miyuki was and for the most part was oblivious to this case. It was also possible that Miyuki also wanted to make double sure that Yutaka wasn't around to hear it.

"Walk with me." Miyuki said and began to walk towards her laboratory again as Minami followed. "You're right, we've known each other for quite some time now and I owe it to you to be honest. I was checking and rechecking their results again last night and I'm afraid that my hypothesis was both right and wrong."

"Right and wrong?" Minami asked with confusion.

"I still believe that universal underdevelopment in their bodies is one of the factors responsible for their diseases, yet they're still going in two different directions. That means that if I find a cure for one, the chances of it working in the other are slim to none." Miyuki sighed as she adjusted her glasses.

"So...what are you saying, Miyuki?" Minami asked and clenched her fists by her side as she awaited the possible verdict.

Miyuki glanced around one final time before she spoke. "Listen, Minami, no matter what conclusion I draw from this, I'm going to need you to be strong for all of us. For me, for Konata-san, and especially for Yutaka-san. Can you do that for me?"

Feeling hollowed by Miyuki's vague but detectably pessimistic response, Minami regardless nodded silently.

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"Being here sure brings back memories." Konata said as she walked side-by-side with Tsukasa at the Hiiragi family shrine in Saitama on the warm spring afternoon. "When was the last time you were a shrine maiden, Tsukasa?"

As they walked, Tsukasa remained passive and unaffected by Konata's hard question. "You know when, Konata."

It suddenly struck Konata and she realized she had made a mistake. Konata never felt socially awkward but knew she messed up when she remembered the last time Tsukasa worked as a Miko was on one particular New Years Eve. What troubled Konata even more than her own faux pas was the fact that Tsukasa seemed completely dismissive of it. She couldn't tell if Tsukasa was angry, upset, or didn't feel anything at all.

Konata gulped before replying, "I'm...I'm so sorry. I forgot and because of all that's been happening, I—"

"It's okay, Kona-chan. Really, I understand." Tsukasa turned and suddenly replied with a surprising smile.

Konata couldn't help but notice the nickname Tsukasa resurrected to make her feel better. Still feeling guilty though, Konata couldn't help but notice her friend taking the bad memory with grace. "You're such a great person, Tsukasa. I thought you would be pissed or something."

Tsukasa shook her head. "I've said this before and I'll say it again. I made peace with that occurrence many years ago and I've moved on. I have a successful career and a family that I wouldn't trade for anything and it's because of those things that I can hold my head up so high."

Konata smiled lightly. "That's so great, Tsukasa. And speaking of families..."

"I'm honored to have you as a part of mine now." The youngest Hiiragi daughter stated her opinion on the matter. "You've been like another sister to me for so many years and I feel even fuller now that you're with Kagami."

Konata was speechless. The only sentence she could say was, "You are such a good person, Tsukasa. Thank you."

Though Tsukasa's old air-headed and innocent personality had disappeared many years ago, she still formed her sweet smile and nodded. "I try my best. I just try to keep thinking about how my children will see me and remember me and I want every moment they have with me to be a positive one so they can learn what goodness and kindness looks like so they can pursue it for themselves one day."

Konata nodded once again. "Where are they, anyway?"

"Their father took them out for lunch but they should be back soon." Tsukasa replied as the two friends arrived at the flowerbed that used to be where the Kagura-den once stood. "Tell me, Kona-chan, what do you plan on telling them when they come back and the rest of my sisters?"

At first being awestruck by the beauty of the flowers, Konata barely heard the question. When she was able to comprehend it, Konata slowly turned

her head. "Your maturity level is so incredible, Tsukasa. I mean we're all adults here, but you already know why I'm here and you were able to see that this wasn't just a visit."

"That's what becoming a mother does to you, Konata." Tsukasa replied as she stared at the flowers. "It makes you aware and it forces you to grow up in a huge hurry because when you hold a being in your arms that literally depends on you for everything, it changes you. When you hold your crying baby in your arms, you see every mistake you've ever made in your past life be washed away in an instant and suddenly there is hope. Hope for change. Hope to start over again. Hope to make tomorrow a brighter one for both yourself and your child. I knew that the second I gave birth to Aito and I held him in my arms for the first time and my husband was there with me. I knew right then and there that things were going to be different and I was going to become stronger for him and ultimately Kiyora."

Konata smiled and looked at the flowers. "These flowers sure are beautiful."

Tsukasa smiled as well, understanding the symbolism of the flowers at the place of the former Kagura-den. "Yes. Yes they are."

"But to answer your question, I was hoping to talk to your sisters about Kagami and I." Konata said.

"You don't have to explain anything to them, you know." Tsukasa's voice suddenly changed and became more serious. "This is a matter that belongs to only you and Kagami, not Inori or Matsuri."

Konata nodded. "I know...but I don't want there to be any animosity or tension between me and them, even if I won't be here for much longer."

"Don't say that, Konata." Tsukasa's sudden stern voice echoed across the shrine and took Konata by surprise. "Have faith in Yuki-chan. She's the doctor, not you, so listen to what she says and above all, keep hope alive."

"You're different than you were in high school, Tsukasa. You're very stern and strong in your words." Konata said as she bent down to the flowers.

"Like I said...I'm a mother now." Tsukasa added. "But what were you planning on telling my kids?"

Konata began to run her palm against the tops of the soft flowers. "I was just planning on telling them that I'm a very good friend of their Aunt Kagami and that I hope we can become friends as well. That's all."

Tsukasa couldn't help but smile at Konata's reservations despite her once flamboyant nature. She wanted to let Aito and Kiyora know that she was a part of Kagami's life while at the same time preserving their innocence. "You're not going to tell them that you're part of the family now?"

Konata stood and shook her head. "I believe that that should be Kagami's job. She is their aunt after all."

Tsukasa smiled sincerely. "So are you, Kona-chan."

Hearing the simple four word sentence hit Konata in the softest part of her core. Turning her head to Tsukasa and seeing the goddess-like mother figure standing before her with such a loving and accepting smile made her want to cry. Kagami aside, Konata now felt that she could truly depart this world in peace knowing that she had a family that would be there to mourn her and ultimately remember her.

The two friends suddenly heard a clamor behind them and turned to see Matsuri approach them. The middle Hiiragi daughter had a passive face but showed signs of reluctance as she walked towards them. Konata knew that neither Matsuri nor Inori were looking forward to this confrontation with the blue-haired woman but knew it was inevitable. As Konata stood, she suddenly felt her esophagus tighten and she began to cough.

"Are you okay, Konata?" Tsukasa asked with concern as she was well-aware of Konata's conditions.

Konata nodded and was successfully able to hide the blood droplets from Tsukasa as she slipped her hand into her pocket. "Yes, yes I'm fine. It's just my usual cough so I'm okay."

The worst part was Konata was telling the truth when she said coughing up blood was normal. It showed the disease's progression was still marching on.

Leaving Tsukasa behind at the flowerbed, Konata stepped forward and stood face-to-face with Matsuri. The two hardly spoke before; not because of a previous feud, but because of fate. The only thing more uncomfortable than talking to a potential in-law was doing it when they were all the same gender and on religious grounds no less. Konata and Kagami had already had intercourse before to add to the melting pot of weirdness for the Hiiragi family as the blue-haired woman cleared her throat.

"Thank you for seeing me here, Matsuri." Konata said as she looked up at Kagami's older sister.

Matsuri's first response was a single nod.

"I owe it to you and your family to be upfront and forthcoming with you so I'll get straight to the point." Konata cleared her throat again. "I love your sister. I've loved her for a long, long time and I guarantee you there isn't any other human alive that would or even could love her as much as I do."

"I see." Matsuri quickly replied while struggling with the idea of either looking into Konata's yellowing eyes or not.

Konata knew she had to break this force field around Matsuri and continued. "I'm sure you know of my diagnosis by now so I just want to say a few things about that. When your sister and I first confessed our love for each other, she was openly honest with me about her abusive relationship with Shido...but I didn't follow her example. I hid my diagnosis from her because I didn't have the strength to tell her. I was so selfish because when I

Feeling the burning stress of yet another horrid day at the office, Koichi Shido walked through the law firm's parking garage towards his newly purchased luxury car. Holding his briefcase in one hand, he wiped his mouth and tongue off with his handkerchief with a scowl on his face. Trying to get a putrid taste out of his mouth, Shido eyed his car and pulled out his keys.

"That damn Ayano. I know she put something weird in my coffee this time." Shido growled to himself. "Tastes like she dumped a heap of saltwater in it."

As he approached the sports car, a new voice in the shadows said, "That's a nice ride you have there, Shido."

Shido froze and quickly looked around. He could only see the other cars parked side-by-side and his only company in the large garage was the numerous shadows within the structure. However, he didn't need to see the face to recognize the voice.

"Yes, yes it is. And yet, I still have more feelings for this car than I ever had for you, Kagami." Shido said to the shadows with a snarl.

On the passenger side of his car, Kagami slowly stepped out of the shadows with her arms folded across her chest, her hair still divided into her infamous twin pigtails and a look of anger on her face. "I'd watch this car carefully if I were you, Shido. It might wise up one day and leave you as well."

"What are you doing here?" He quickly snapped.

"I just wanted to check-in and see how things are going at the firm. I've been hearing you've been having some trouble lately. It seems my friends from other firms aren't too happy with the way you're running things." Kagami replied, her arms still folded across her chest and a glare still leering at Shido. "From what Ayano has been telling me, the phones have been ringing off the hook demanding answers as to why I was let go and there are talks of corruption investigations going on."

Shido glared at Kagami. "She's lying just to make you feel better and to make you not feel so worthless."

Kagami eyed the luxurious car. "I can't help but notice that you get control of my firm, then you're driving a new car, and now there are allegations of corruption. Let me guess; money from the firm is disappearing. Bank accounts are coming up a little light...aren't they? Where's all this money going, Shido? Could it be that you're driving it?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." Shido quickly replied.

"Oh I think you do...but I'm not here about that. I'm here because I was hoping you could tell me where I could find Patricia Martin." Her words were quick and unexpected.

Hearing the request caught Shido off guard, just as Kagami was hoping for. She saw his facial muscles twitch and it was this tick that made Kagami

satisfied with herself but she still kept her intimidating look.

After several stuttering spurts, Shido was finally able to say, "How did you..."

"Come on Shido, you should know me by now. You know I can put things together and execute a little bit of common sense every now and then. Who else would not only have a grudge against me to do this, but also be smart enough to know how to get back at me?" Kagami sneered. "I know it was her that took that picture of Konata and I kissing at that café so spill it. Where is she?"

Shido smirked. "And here I thought you were here to accuse me yet again of murdering your father."

Kagami's glare tightened. "You know your days are numbered regardless and I promise you I will take you down for that no matter how long it may take. For now, I want to take out another thorn in my side once and for all, now where is she?"

"Well...it seems you caught us, Kagami. Yes, Patty is the one who took the picture and showed it to me so I could use it as blackmail. She told me about what your slut sister did to her when she was in high school and what she did to get revenge. I must say; she's a visionary." Shido said with a malicious grin. "I knew Tsukasa was pumped with a mean streak along with whatever else she was pumped with when she was spoiled by those poor boys, but I never thought she would violently attack a friend like that."

Kagami tried to keep herself under control. It was taking all her strength to not leap across the car and strangle Shido because of how he spoke of her sister. Clearing her throat, she replied, "Patty did what she did and Tsukasa did what she did. I'm sure not a day goes by that Tsukasa doesn't regret what she did to her, but destroying our shrine, spreading those pictures around cyberspace, taking advantage of her decrepit state at the time; she's a monster."

"Give me one good reason why I should tell you where she is." Shido replied, becoming tired of Kagami's persistence.

"I don't need to give you a reason, Shido. I just thought that maybe you would leap at the opportunity of throwing someone else under the bus if it meant that your ego and your sovereignty would be safe for another day." Kagami replied. "If anything it would give you a break from me for awhile."

Shido thought about what Kagami told him and had to admit to himself that she was becoming a constant headache for him. She continued to pursue him about Tadao and if he gave up Patty, maybe she would forget about her father and move on. His choice to surrender Patty and believe this falsehood that Kagami would give up on her father only further proved how little he knew the twin-tailed woman. Shido surrendered the details of where she was living and where she usually went during the course of a day.

"Thank you...and I'll see you around." Kagami finished and walked around the side of the car past Shido without fear.

As he watched her, seeing that she no longer had fear in him angered him. Without thinking, he suddenly grabbed Kagami by the shoulder and pulled her back. She pushed her against the side of the car while grabbing both her hands and pinning them above her head on the roof of the car. He used his free hand to touch Kagami's face and she showed her disgust for the man's touch.

"What...aren't you going to cry? Aren't you going to scream? We're all alone in this garage and there are no security cameras on this level. I could strip you down right now and rape you here, just like your sister and nobody would hear your cries for help." He whispered in a heinous tone.

To his further surprise, Kagami only formed a grin as she remained pinned to the car. "Then do it, Shido."

Something was wrong and the corrupt man suddenly became paranoid as he backed off. "What?"

"I said do it. Try and rape me but I must warn you...if you try and force it inside of me, I swear by the Almighty that you won't get it back." Kagami replied with no fear in her voice. "I will break it off myself and give it to the first stray dog I find in the streets. So go ahead; use me...if you dare."

Seeing the raging fire of confidence and bravery burn in Kagami's eyes was enough to frighten the cowardly Shido. Slowly and still baffled, he released Kagami's wrists and slowly backed away, allowing the woman to stand tall again, brush herself off, and continue walking out of the garage without saying another word.

As he watched Kagami walk without even glancing back to ensure her own safety, Shido was angered again. He couldn't help but mutter to himself, "What's with these Hiiragi twins? Why won't they break? No matter...I think I know the perfect way to destroy Kagami once and for all. I think I'll pay her girlfriend a visit in the hospital."

Shido entered his luxurious car and quickly sped in the other direction as Kagami continued to walk. Shido was so busy driving and planning his next move, he didn't even think to check the passenger side of his car since Kagami was waiting for him for awhile. Kagami had keyed the entire passenger side of his car with her nail and was even able to inscribe "Woman Beater" on the side in addition to the hundreds of new scratches on the expensive car.

CHAPTER 16

Konata tried her best to breathe normally but her nerves continued to get the better of her as Miyuki drove another hollowed metal rod into the blue-haired woman's back. Konata sat on her hospital bed and leaned forward while resting on her tray with her hospital robe untied in the back. It sent a shiver throughout Konata's body when she felt the metal rod puncture her lung and Miyuki sent another smaller needle into the rod to collect a sample.

"Okay I'm almost done here, Konata-san. You're doing great." Miyuki said as she successfully retracted the sample and placed it in another test tube with Konata's name on it. "Now just lay back and rest for the remainder of the day."

Miyuki tied Konata's hospital robe in the back together again and the blue-haired woman rested back on the bed. She felt strange and thought it was a result of the procedure, or maybe it was her upset stomach returning again which meant she wouldn't be able to eat certain foods. Either way, she continued to breathe regularly and felt her lungs take in the fresh air as if nothing happened.

"How did Yutaka handle her biopsy?" Konata asked as she stared at the ceiling.

Miyuki nodded while she stored the sample properly. "She did great. Minami was there with her so I think that had a lot to do with it."

Konata sighed. "That woman means a lot to Yutaka."

"Kind of like how Kagami-san means a lot to you?" Miyuki inadvertently blurted out, which she recognized instantly and immediately blushed.

While still lying flat on the bed, Konata's eyes widened. "What was that, Miyuki?"

In a sweating and flushed mess, Miyuki quickly turned and waved her hands at Konata. "Oh please don't misunderstand me, Konata-san! I just was simply implying that Minami cares deeply for Yutaka and vice-versa!"

"That...is kind of the same thing, Miyuki." Konata said in a shocked monotone voice.

After stuttering several more times, Miyuki forced out, "I need to get these to the lab!"

The blushing doctor quickly scurried out of the hospital room, leaving Konata alone and confused. She didn't know what to make of Miyuki's outburst but continued to roll the idea around in her head. It triggered her to think of her history at high school more in-depth about herself and the people she was surrounded with. She never really thought about it before but she had Kagami, Ayano always was close to Misao, and now it seemed Yutaka and Minami had sparks between them.

Were there even any boys at our school?

Hearing a knock at the door triggered Konata to snap out of her train of thought and lift her head to look at the door with confusion. If it was Kagami she would've just simply entered without knocking so someone else was on the other side of her door.

"Come in." She said.

The doorknob turned and Konata felt a slight wave of cheeriness when she saw Hiyori enter the room, her sketch book still hugged to her chest. "Hey

there." She said.

Konata rested her head back on her pillow. She was happy to see a familiar face take away her loneliness but wished it was Kagami. "How much do you know?" Konata asked while trying her best to not sound annoyed. She knew that Hiyori didn't have to come see her but she did regardless.

"Everything." Hiyori said as she pulled a chair over. "But don't worry; I'm not mad. If anything, I should be apologizing to you."

"For what?"

"When you first got your diagnosis, I was pushing work on you and everything when you needed space so for that I'm sorry." She replied.

Konata shook her head. "Don't be...if anything I should apologize for keeping you in the dark for as long as I have. I probably should've been more engaged in work because it might have helped me take my mind off this."

Hiyori nodded. "Either way, I understand. I just wanted to visit and see how you were doing."

"I appreciate that, Hiyorin. You're a good friend." Konata smiled and sighed with nostalgia.

Her fellow long-haired otaku nodded again. "So is there anything I can get for you? Maybe some water or some food?"

Konata slowly shook her head. "No that's okay. But you actually could tell me a few things about the new story you were writing on. That would cheer me up."

Hiyori's face suddenly went pale and sweat began to form across her head and palms. Her eyes darted in her head until she could finally confess something to Konata. "Actually, Konata, we have a problem with that. I didn't want to say anything because of your condition, though."

Growing tired of everyone treating her differently because of her diagnosis, Konata groaned and replied with annoyance, "Look, just tell me, Hiyorin."

Hiyori gulped and nodded. "Well, I got a call from our publisher and they said that because we haven't been able to produce anything new in a long time, they're threatening to discontinue our contract. Unless we can come up with a new story soon, we'll be out of a job."

Hearing this was upsetting to Konata, though she had to admit that she had mixed emotions about it at this point. She sympathized for her friend and business partner, but at the same time believed that she didn't have to worry about Earthly things like careers or keeping her dream job anymore. For the first time in her life outside of her academics, she just didn't care about dreams.

Nevertheless, she sighed and looked away. "Well what do you want me to do about it?"

Hiyori knew she was treading into dangerous waters when she came but tried to delay it for as long as she could. She had known about Konata's disease for awhile and had kept her distance to allow the blue-haired woman to compose herself until she was ready to talk again. But that unfortunately didn't matter to the publishing companies as they only saw Konata and Hiyori as moneymakers and nothing else. When Konata dropped out of the picture, Hiyori became the whipping girl for the publishers and had to take all of their angry calls and emails while allowing Konata to seek treatment. Still, Hiyori believed that she still needed to protect herself and her job and ask Konata to help her.

"Well...I was sort of hoping—" Hiyori began but another knock on the door stopped her.

Before Konata could look up, the door opened and Yutaka entered the room and was accompanied by Minami. As Yutaka entered, she saw her cousin was done with her biopsy. "Oh hey Konata, are you feeling okay?"

"I'm fine. How are you?" Konata asked.

"A little dizzy but all and all I'm still hanging in there. Oh, Hiyori, it has been while!" Yutaka exclaimed happily and moved over to hug her.

Hiyori remembered to be gentle with Yutaka and returned the hug. "It has been awhile. I heard about your condition, too. Hang in there though, you have Konata and—"

It was then that Hiyori saw Minami Iwasaki dressed from head to toe in her nurse's uniform. She suddenly made the connection when she saw Yutaka standing side-by-side dressed in only a hospital robe and she suddenly began to think. She couldn't help but see the taste in special interests involved and felt a tingling in her body that manifested as a facial movement.

"Um...Hiyori? Your nose is bleeding. Are you okay?" Yutaka asked with concern.

Hiyori quickly placed her hand over her nose and stopped the flow of the red liquid and nodded. "Yes, yes I'm fine. It's just...um...altitude."

Konata cleared her throat as Hiyori reached over and began to stuff tissues into her nostrils to cork the flow. "So anyway, why do you need my help, Hiyorin? You have a vivid imagination, too. I'm sure you could come up with a great story all on your own."

Sometimes I think it's too vivid, Hiyori thought to herself.

"Trust me, I've stayed up days and nights trying to think of one but nothing has been coming. You know my well isn't that deep to begin with and I've always done the drawing. I could really use your help but if you don't want

to I completely understand." Hiyori replied while trying to sound as sensitive and sympathetic as she could. "I just don't want to lose everything as well."

"Lose everything?! Is that what you just said to me?!" Konata suddenly became enraged and made everyone jump.

"Th...that wasn't what I meant, Konata!" Hiyori tried to defend herself. "I... I just meant that I don't want to lose my job or—"

"You think you know what it's like to lose something, Hiyori?! You don't know shit about that! I'm the one that's dying, I'm the one that's losing my entire world!" Konata added with angry volume as her eyes flooded again. "My life felt so empty for a long time and when I finally get the one thing I've wanted for so long, someone else's love, I'm going to die! Why do you think you own the corner market on suffering?!"

Holding her sketch book up like a shield, Hiyori felt her feelings get battered. "You...you know I didn't mean it like that, Konata. Please don't take it personally. I just thought—"

"You thought wrong!" Konata's angry face was beginning to burn red. "You want a story? Okay, I'll give you one! There's this girl who has felt depressed and alone for so many years now because no one ever understood her or even tried to make the effort! She never knew her mother and her only connection was through games and anime and even then she felt ostracized from other people but she still tried to keep a flamboyant personality with the hope that one day it would change!"

"Konata!" Yutaka tried to interrupt but Konata kept going without missing a beat.

"Then one day she meets a girl in high school and falls madly in love with her but she's too afraid to tell her for fear of her hurting her and making this woman feel even more depressed and rejected! After so many years of wallowing in depression for never telling her and feeling that she wasted her whole life, she gets a diagnosis from a doctor that says her clock is about to strike midnight but then, she can finally have her love! Only after she knows she's going to die! There you go, Hiyori! Now all you need is a title! How about something like 'The Fairness of Life?!'" Konata finished her rant despite the fact that Yutaka was trying to quell her angry cousin.

"Stop it, Konata! Look at what you did to Hiyori!" Yutaka angrily yelled.

Still breathing hard, Konata looked and saw her long-haired business partner was crying. She held her sketch book to her chest with her right arm while she wiped away tears from her eyes with her left hand. She hiccupped a few times as she continued to cry, though her feelings weren't hurt because she was shouted at; she wept for her friend's condition. Hiyori knew that this wasn't the real Konata and it pained her so much to see the once vibrant blue-haired woman in such a decrepit state.

A long silence fell on the room and Yutaka hoped Konata would make the next move. When she did, it wasn't the one Yutaka was hoping for when Konata glared at Hiyori again and hissed, "Are you going to write me and my cousin a cure and a happy ending, Hiyori?"

The final statement only drew more tears from Hiyori and she exhaled a deep cry as she stood and walked out of the room. When she left, Yutaka glared at Konata. "How could you, Konata?! She was only here to make you feel better and ask for a little bit of help!"

Yutaka quickly ran after Hiyori calling her name while Minami stayed. It was a good thing too because Konata's face turned a brighter red and she began to sway back and forth in her bed. She coughed again and more blood emerged from her mouth as she uttered, "Minami...I feel hot."

Minami rushed into action and told Konata to lay flat again and the green-haired woman began to work on the patient. The tantrum had overpowered Konata's senses and drained her body of energy while the disease tried to take advantage of her even weaker state.

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Sitting in her car, Kagami stared dumbfounded at the place where she expected to see Patricia Martin for the first time since high school. She remembered that day all those years ago when Konata and Hiyori worked together to expose Patty as the culprit who spread those explicit pictures of Tsukasa around, as well as linking her to the shrine attack.

When Konata and Hiyori had their meeting in the principal's office after Konata played Patty's confession over the school's intercom, the police were called. An investigation ensued and ultimately, Patty was arrested and expelled from school. However, she wasn't completely brainless when it

came to understanding the trouble she was in. She wasn't alone in vandalizing the shrine after all and she made the right move to turn over the teenage boys who helped her to the police as most of them had arrest warrants anyway for other offenses. As a result, Patty's criminal offenses were knocked down to a series of misdemeanors and she only served a month in jail. Kagami and the rest of the girls lost contact with Patty after she was arrested and they assumed she went back to America but evidently they were wrong.

Finishing her trip down memory lane, Kagami shook herself out of her trance and looked at the building where Shido said she'd find Patty. To her surprise, it was a day spa. Shido told her that the only work she could get was as a custodian after her criminal record and her high school expulsion came to light. Nevertheless, Kagami left her car and entered the spa's lobby and it only further surprised her of how nice it was. It was clearly a very expensive setup with water fountains and assorted colorful shrubbery and Kagami approached the front desk.

"May I help you?" The female clerk asked.

"Yes, I have a reservation under Hiiragi for a manicure and a pedicure." Kagami said nonchalantly and continued to look around while the clerk typed her name into the computer.

"Yes, Hiiragi-san. Please have a seat and we will be with you shortly." She replied with a smile.

Kagami thanked her and took a seat in the waiting room while relaxing and therapeutic music continued to play over the loudspeakers, though Kagami was anything but relaxed. She barely had a plan and came here mostly on impulse but if she came face-to-face with Patty, she was sure she would be able to improvise.

Opportunity suddenly presented itself when two workers approached one another and the first asked, "Have you seen Patricia-san? She can sweep room number six now."

"I think she punched out for the day because I saw her with her bathing suit and I think she's using one of the hot tubs." The other said.

Kagami quickly decided to abandon her appointment, which was just a front anyway and searched for the hot tubs. She was able to follow the smell of chlorine through the hallways until she was able to find the signs pointing her in the direction of the hot water therapy stations. As she continued to search for Patty, her use of the chlorine to locate her was rejected when she heard the humming of the familiar high-pitched voice and followed it the rest of the way.

With her eyes closed and humming to the lyrics of a song on her iPod, Patricia Martin rested her body in the hot bubbling water, enjoying the benefits of working there. As the steam continued to fog the room and while she felt her many troubles melting away, Patty couldn't help but notice something while her song continued to play. The volume was getting lower and lower even though it was in the middle of the song.

Confused by the strange occurrence, Patty began to feel for her iPod as she continued to rest her eyes. As her hands searched the tile floor, her relaxation was shattered when her hand came across the shape and feel of a human shoe with a foot inside. Patty shot her eyes open and saw Kagami Hiiragi standing over top of her with her iPod in her grip and a stern look on her face. Before Patty was even able to recognize her as Kagami, she shrieked loudly by the sudden intrusion while the twin-tailed woman continued to hold onto her iPod with her fingers on the volume control.

When Patty finally recognized it was Kagami through the fog, her fear settled and her anger rose. Patty opened the dialogue with, "I knew you were a lesbian but sneaking into a woman's hot tub room while she's trying to relax? You really have no shame."

"You're one to talk." Kagami quickly replied with a serious voice as she held onto the electronic device and bent down to Patty. "I thought you went back to America but it turns out you stayed here and made a new friend, didn't you?"

Patty's satisfied smirk showed itself again on her face. "Yeah, I made a new friend, if you want to be so liberal in your thinking. I'd like to think of him as a pawn, which I'm sure he sees me that way as well."

"Please don't tell me you're sleeping with him now. I pray that you have at least one slice of dignity and self-respect left." Kagami retorted while keeping her eyes fixated on Patty.

"Don't flatter yourself, Hiiragi. This was strictly a quid pro quo relationship. He scratched my back and I scratched his by following you and taking that pretty good shot of you and Konata." Patty replied with a smile. "I must say, you Hiiragi twins do the worst things when a camera is pointed in your direction."

Kagami formed a glare. "What are you getting out of this unholy alliance of the damned, Patty?"

Patty's smirk deepened. "What I've always wanted. To see everything you've ever dreamed of be destroyed before your very eyes, Kagami. Whether that was your law firm or even your true love."

Still being driven by curiosity, Kagami decided to dig deeper. There was still one major question Kagami wanted answered when she asked, "But I must ask...why are you doing this? For real this time."

Patty's confident face faded. "I just told you, Kagami. I want your life and your family's lives to be one giant endless hell."

"Why?" Kagami poked. "That doesn't make any sense, Patty. Is it just because of what Tsukasa did to you nearly two decades ago? Logic isn't on your side if you say that's the reason."

The shifting in Patty's eyes showed Kagami that she was right. There was a deeper reason why Patty was persecuting Kagami and her family. Even after all these years she still couldn't let it go. It had to be something big as no

one in their right mind would hold a seventeen year grudge over a fight in high school.

Before Patty could reply, Kagami added more with an event from the past. "I remember before Tsukasa did what she did to you, Hiyori Tamura made a mistake by creating a manga of her own and the plot of the story revolved around the rape of a Miko. I also made a mistake by fighting her and I paid the price for it but Hiyori found it in her heart to forgive me as I did for her and we moved on. Then Tsukasa attacked you and seventeen years later you still can't move on. Why? What's different between these two scenarios, Patty? Why is it that Hiyori could let it go but you couldn't?"

Kagami knew she hit a soft spot when Patty began to search for a way out of her predicament. Patty's eyes were telling a story, one that Kagami was ignorant of and didn't know about. Because of her sharp intuition, Kagami could tell that it had something to do with Patty's past, maybe her childhood that was making her continue her illogical quest for revenge.

"You wouldn't understand, Kagami. Not even if I told you why I'm doing all of this." Patty sneered, her eyes still looking away from Kagami but her voice suddenly shifted and it was filled with blind fury and hate.

"I could try," Kagami replied.

Patty sighed. "Fine...I'll tell you. When I was growing up, I was the one lonely girl that was always getting bullied. Whether I was in the classroom, the playground at recess, or if I was walking down the street. Someone from either my neighborhood or my school continued to make fun of me, push

me down, whatever. All because I had different interests than them. When I was a little girl, I was obsessed with dragons and castles and things like that. The fantasy genre was my entire life at the time. I had no friends in school except an imaginary dragon that I even thought would become real and come to my rescue whenever I would be pushed around if I wished hard enough. But it never did. My parents never understood me. They took me to several child psychologists but they didn't understand me either. I was just different...and yet they couldn't wrap their minds around that. No matter how healthy I was on the inside, they were convinced that something had to be wrong with me. It continued like this throughout my childhood."

Kagami continued to listen keenly.

"It wasn't until middle school that things finally came to a head. I had just about enough of all the abuse and torment and I was at the end of my rope. It happened at lunch one day. When I got my food from the lunch ladies and as I was walking to my usual table to sit alone, someone stuck their foot out and I tripped and landed in my food. Everyone started laughing. Some even dumped more food on me and when I tried to get up, another girl snuck up behind me and pulled my pants down. Everyone saw me standing there in my underwear and they only laughed harder." Patty's eyes showed Kagami a vortex of swirling hate and anger as her voice also illustrated. "I had a mental breakdown after that and my parents finally took me out of school. I transferred to another school, only to be met with similar treatment. During my middle school years, I fell in love with Japanese anime and manga because it suddenly became my only portal of escape from the horrors of reality because I felt that I could connect with all these different characters and storylines a lot better than I could with any person. I felt that Japan was this incredible place and I saw my whole reason for coming here as my escape from my old life to maybe start a new one. I just wanted to fit in. That was my only dream in life. To belong; but it became an empty dream. When Tsukasa did that to me and as I laid curling and crying on that classroom floor, I felt that I was back in middle school again and something inside me...snapped."

Kagami continued to listen.

"When I was finally let out of jail, my parents didn't want me to come home. They had had enough of me and brushed me off as a mistake. I had nowhere to go. I was allowed to stay here because I turned over those other guys who helped vandalize your family's shrine. I was in Japan, a place I saw as an opportunity to belong to the otaku culture, and yet I still couldn't fit in. That's it. That's why I have been persecuting you and your family for so long." Patty finished.

Kagami sighed. "I'm sorry all of that had to happen to you, Patty. You were just an innocent child and didn't deserve any of that. I understand your anger now, but what I still can't comprehend is why you allowed yourself to stoop to the levels of your childhood attackers. By doing all of this, don't you see that you've become your own worst enemy? Anyone of any race, gender, culture, country, you name it can hurt you. Did you know that I took an internship to the United States before I became a lawyer?"

Patty nodded, her eyes still refusing to look at Kagami.

"Did you also know that I was hurt deeply by someone while I was over there?" Kagami added.

This grabbed Patty's attention and she slowly looked back at Kagami with inviting eyes, hoping the twin-tailed woman would share the secret.

"When I arrived over there, I became friends with a young student named Mark Young. He was the nicest and most generous young man I had ever met and I never expected to be met with such hospitality from him. I'll even admit that at one point I had feelings for him and I probably would've stayed in America if we became more than friends." Kagami reminisced. "But as nice as he was, he had secret problems of his own. He had a brother named Dylan who had just gotten out of jail for drug offenses and he came to both of us one day and he swore that he had seen the error of his ways and that he was now clean. He promised me that if I loaned him some money, he would use it to get his own place and get a new suit to get a job and do you know what he did to me?"

Patty shook her head.

"He stole from me. He took the money my parents sent me from here in Japan and left. One week later, he was arrested again by an undercover officer who was posing as a drug dealer. He was trying to use the money I gave him out of the kindness of my heart and that my parents worked hard for to buy drugs." Kagami revealed. "When Mark found out, he was devastated and couldn't stop apologizing to me. Even though he paid me back out of his own pocket, my point is this, Patty. Anybody can and will hurt you. Ignorance and being a jackass knows no bounds."

Patty remained silent and looked away again.

"Look, I have to be honest with you. When I was on my way here, my only thought was that when I found you, I was planning on holding your head underwater until you stopped struggling." Kagami continued. "But now that you've opened up to me, I do understand. I do. Now that I told you all of

this, I'm not going to do anything. I'm going to do what you should've done seventeen years ago and walk away."

To Patty's surprise, Kagami handed her iPod over and Patty slowly took it as Kagami stood. "Even though I'm the one that enabled Shido to vote you out of your own firm?"

Kagami nodded. "I'm going to let you alone in peace...because that's what my father would've wanted. That's also what Tsukasa would want. Please think about what I've told you, Patty. Shido is a very bad man and if you ever want any chance of redemption in this world, you'll break this partnership off with him and let Konata and I live in peace."

Deepening Patty's surprise, Kagami turned and walked out of the hot tub room. Patty held her iPod to her chest over the water and began to think. Kagami's words still rattled around in her head and she began to rethink many things.

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As the hours progressed, the activity in the hospital began to wind down and Konata's wing of the hospital began to slow. Kagami had visited her after her talk with Patty and left when visiting hours were over but made sure she gave Konata a scolding for how she treated Hiyori. Yutaka fell asleep in a hurry while Minami also left for the night and Miyuki continued to work hard and long to prove her hypothesis wrong. When Konata had her outburst against Hiyori, Minami had to give the blue-haired woman a series of drugs to prevent any damage, which also made her drowsy. At the advice

of Miyuki, Konata was going to stay in the hospital overnight to make sure no more complications would occur.

Konata exited her hospital room's bathroom and eyed her large bed to sleep for the night. Something suddenly caught her eye and she looked and saw the large door of her hospital room was wide open. Still seeing she was alone, she slowly walked over to the door and saw the activity in the hallway was very quiet, which she thought was perfect. Now she could get a goodnight's sleep for once.

She slowly closed the door while turning her back towards it, making her vision obscure from what was behind the door in her room. A tall man stood hiding behind the door and was now alone in the room with Konata as the ailing blue-haired woman limped towards her bed.

"Finally, we meet." The man dressed in black said.

Konata shrieked and quickly jumped around and saw the man in her room. "Who...who are you?"

"Who, me? That's simple. I'm the essence of every nightmare Kagami has ever had." He hissed.

Konata narrowed her eyes to form a glare. "Koichi Shido."

"Very good, Konata." He replied with a grin as he stepped forward. "I trust you've been taking good care of Kagami for me."

"Better care than you ever did!" She snapped. "What are you doing here?!"

Shido formed a grin, unsettling Konata. "I just came to check on the woman who is responsible for giving Kagami the strength to wake up in the mornings and continue to live despite all my best efforts to destroy her from the inside-out. I heard you've seen better days health wise though."

Konata held her ground. "It's Kagami's strength that gives me strength. She's the reason why I'm still here and I'll always be here for her!"

"Really? Always...or more like less than two months?" Shido replied, making Konata tighten her glare. "Some lover and supporter you are. You'll be there to love and support her, only to die slowly and painfully. I can see it now; Kagami will be resting herself on your casket and crying like a baby over your dead carcass, knowing you'll be put in the cold, dark earth to remain cold and alone for the rest of eternity. How long until the worms and maggots break through that casket and make your body into their bed and breakfast? Spending your whole life alone and when you can finally have Kagami, she's taken away from you."

Konata began to tremble in both anger and fear. "You're...you're just trying to get into my head, Shido."

Shido's grin deepened. "Look at yourself, Konata. I already have. I can see myself in your eyes right now. You know everything I've said is true. You're going to die...and there's nothing anyone can do about it. In less than two months, you'll be underground."

Breathing deeply, Konata felt her knees begin to shake. "Leave me alone, but most of all, leave Kagami alone. Let her be happy. Let us be happy."

To her horror, Shido shook his head. "I'm afraid I can't do that."

"Say what?"

"You don't seem to understand, Konata. I must destroy Kagami." He snapped and continued to step forward closer to Konata and the blue-haired woman began to slowly retreat. "I cannot and I will not stop until everything she ever has or ever will love is taken away from her until there is nothing else to take except her own life. By that point, I will just sit back and wait until her obituary appears in the newspaper that will tell me she had died by her own hands. It'll look great on my refrigerator."

"Kagami would never do anything so foolish!" Konata tried to scream but her weakened condition hindered it. "She knows how much it would hurt the ones she loves! Her sisters, her niece and nephews, and me...even if I am dead!"

"I can see you still have spirit, even in your current state." Shido replied. "I can also see that it's this spirit that gives Kagami the will to be stronger and

you give her a reason worth fighting for. There's only one solution...I must break you."

Konata's face became pale and her instincts prompted her to inhale as much air as she could so she could scream for help. It all happened so fast. Before Konata could scream, Shido launched forward and wrapped his hand around her neck and squeezed with all his might. Konata tried her best to thrash and free herself but Shido's healthy body proved dominant and using his strength, he began to lift Konata off the floor.

As she coughed and gagged for fresh air, Shido continued. "I can lift you without breaking a sweat. Tearing you to pieces will be child's play."

Konata continued to weakly kick at Shido but her short legs missed hitting his body as she wrapped both her wrists around his constricting grip. It was barely audible but Konata was able to whimper, "Shido...don't..."

Keeping his smile, Shido summoned more power in his arms and was able to toss Konata across the room. Her body crashed against the tile floor and slid as she gasped for air and fought back her own tears as she struggled to get up. Seeing Shido slowly approach her only increased her fear but she couldn't give up.

She knew she was still in trouble when Shido wrapped his hand around her hospital robe and lifted her up while saying, "Let me help you."

As Konata lifted her head to look at him, she saw his palm strike her face and she fell to the floor again in searing pain. She held her face and let a tear slip as Shido latched onto her foot and dragged her across the tile floor. Grabbing her by her hair, his intent was to throw her onto the bed but he was surprised to see himself lose his grip when his handful of hair detached from Konata's head and she fell to the floor again.

Puzzled and angered by the handful of blue hair, he clapped it off his hand and grabbed Konata by her arm and hoisted her up onto the bed and held her down. As Konata tried to remain brave, the last thing she said to Shido was, "Please stop, I can't defend myself."

Hearing the silent plea, Shido smiled again. "I'm counting on that. I heard you once took martial arts so we wouldn't want you to ruffle my nice suit."

Shido held the blue-haired woman down and continued his violent attack. He switched from open palms to closed fists whenever he pleased. He lost track of the time as he continued to hit and strangle Konata relentlessly, even when she stopped resisting and even stopped moving altogether. When the attack was over fifteen minutes after it began, Shido opened the hospital room door and made sure the coast was clear. A few nurses were seen further down the hall dealing with an emotional patient so he was in the clear to leave the hospital.

Stepping out of the silent room, he closed the door behind him while wiping his knuckles with a handkerchief. With a content look on his face, he walked down the hallway while wiping his knuckles.

I think I hit her too hard. She stopped moving awhile ago. Wish I could see the look on Kagami's face when she finds out tomorrow.

As he walked towards the lighted exit signs, Shido dropped the handkerchief in an open wastebasket. It was soaked in blood. Konata's blood.

CHAPTER 17

Feeling unsettled by a dream she had the previous night, Kagami entered the hospital at a hastened pace. It was her dream that prompted her to return to the hospital early the next morning, even before most of the staff checked back in for the day. With each passing day, she was becoming increasingly tired of sleeping alone in her bed at night without the one she loved with her. Though she knew the importance of Konata staying at the hospital periodically, this still wasn't any comfort or consolation and if anything, it was the opposite.

Entering the corridor where Konata was staying, Kagami continued to see the dream she had last night replay in her mind. In the midst of her slumber last night, Kagami was able to see herself as a child again and running happily while laughing in a flowery meadow as cherry blossom petals fell around her. She was all by herself yet she was still happy as she continued to laugh and run. The petals suddenly turned from pink to blue and began to stretch out as they formed countless threads of blue and they fell around her. The flowers she ran through also changed and they all turned horrid shades of black and blue, the kind of colors one would only see on a battered human face after being struck so many times. Before she woke up, Kagami could've also sworn she heard a faint voice call, "I saved your sister, now you must save my daughter."

When Kagami awoke, the only thing she had on her mind was getting to Konata. She felt calmer once she arrived at the hospital and as she graced the hallways, she felt completely settled when nothing was out of the usual. Nurses and doctors continued to walk around and do their jobs without missing a beat and there was no signs of stress or panic anywhere.

Kagami eyed Konata's hospital room door and she felt a smile form across her mouth. She hoped that Miyuki would allow her to take Konata out of the hospital for the day as she wanted to spend more time with the blue-haired woman. If she could, Kagami wanted to take Konata out for breakfast and because the weather was going to be sunny and warm all day, she hoped for a walk in the park as well.

Grabbing the doorknob, Kagami turned it and pushed the door open while simultaneously saying, "Knock, knock! I hope you're awake and hungry for ____"

Kagami stopped talking and was puzzled to see Konata's bed was empty. To make the scenario even more mysterious, the bed sheet was gone and it was just the mattress wrapped in the covering sheet. Even the pillow was gone, though Kagami didn't see it was on the other side of the bed in the corner, one side of it stained with blood.

Maybe Miyuki took her to run another test or something.

Something peculiar caught Kagami's eyes and she looked down at the white tile floor, only to see more than a dozen blue threads littering it. Motivated

by curiosity, Kagami approached them and bent down to them. Her heart quickly sped up when she realized it was a bundle of Konata's hair. She never lost this much hair at one time and with her missing, Kagami feared there was a complication last night and Konata was taken somewhere.

As Kagami stood to run and call for assistance, something stopped her. The faint sound of some living being and it sounded like it was hurt and barely alive. But what was it? Kagami's mind instantly jumped to a wounded animal whimpering and it seemed to be coming from the hospital room's bathroom. Still perked by her morbid curiosity, Kagami approached the bathroom door and something else suddenly caught her eyes.

Red spots on the white floor leading from the bed to the bathroom door. Paint...or something else? She opened the door and peered in, allowing the sounds to become clearer as the wooden barricade was parted. It wasn't an animal whimpering, but rather a human crying softly and in pain. Kagami could see the toilet sitting against the wall and directly to the right was the shower with the curtain drawn. Glancing down, Kagami saw a portion of the missing bed sheet under the drawn curtain with a dried patch of red stained on it.

The crying was incessant and horrible. It may have been a human hiding in the shower but that was the cry of a being that was truly devastated and ravaged for whatever reason. Kagami continued her approach and her heart pounded faster when she recognized the cries and whimpers to belong to Konata. She had heard these cries before and the last time she heard them was during Tsukasa's downward spiral. This time however it was different and worse. She never heard these sounds coming from Konata before and hoped it was only because of her sickness but that still didn't explain the red stains. She prayed they weren't blood.

Kagami slowly gripped the shower curtain and pulled it aside. She froze. So many explosive emotions tore through her body and so quickly that her only able-bodied response was to stand and stare. It was still early in the morning so she could still be asleep, right? This had to be a nightmare. She had seen Konata in many different ways, whether it was in her usual happy and eccentric nature, her many personalities as a cosplayer, and even as the sensitive, kind-hearted friend that everyone loved. However, Kagami never saw Konata like this.

The blue-haired woman was curled into a ball in the corner of the shower, still dressed in her hospital robe and holding the sheet over her face and crying relentlessly into it. Her wails of sorrow and pain pierced Kagami's ear drums and she felt sick to her stomach as she slowly bent down to Konata. The blue-haired woman's petite arms were bruised and battered and Kagami feared she knew what had taken place here as she stared at the patterned black marks. Konata's left hand that held the sheet over her crying face was black and violet all over and Kagami could tell right away it was broken.

"Ko...Konata...?" Her squeaky voice forced out as she reached forward, still trying to sort through the countless emotions that ravaged her mind, body, and soul.

"No, don't, Kagami!" Konata cried into the sheet. "Don't look at me! I'm hideous!"

Shaking uncontrollably and feeling the trillions of emotions at once, Kagami continued to outstretch her hand and guided it towards Konata's head. Konata instantly flinched from Kagami's touch and the twin-tailed woman could feel the petite woman tremble and shake from post-traumatic

fear. A heinous crime had befallen her beloved Konata and Kagami had a sinking feeling she knew who was responsible. She didn't know what to feel, whether it was anger, hatred, sadness, depression, panic, confusion, helplessness, or a combination of everything.

"You could never look hideous to me, Konata." Kagami whispered as she felt her tears mount and her panic was detectable in her voice. "You were made just for me and everything about you is perfect, no matter what any suited vulture does to you."

Hearing the final part of Kagami's sentence triggered more emotions for Konata as she kept her face covered. She cried louder and harder before she too could find her voice. "I'm sorry, Kagami! I'm so sorry! I tried to fight him off but I couldn't because I was too sick! He was just too strong for me! I've never felt this weak before in my life and now look what it has gotten me!"

Keeping her hand placed on Konata's head, Kagami began to gently rub the crying blue-haired woman and her fear rose when she felt bumps hidden under her hair. "Please...let me see you, Konata."

Still crying unremittingly, Konata paused and slowly began to lower the blood-stained bed sheet until it began to reveal the damage done to her small body. When Kagami saw it, she felt her entire body go numb and it took every muscle in her neck and mouth to keep from vomiting. Her eyes were constricted as she fought back the tears and Kagami knew exactly what to feel when she saw the blue-haired love of her life and what was done to her. The emotion she felt matched the physical destruction of Konata's body. Devastation.

Konata's entire face was battered and her skin was an unholy and sickening collage of black, blue, purple, and red all over. Both her green eyes were submerged in purple swollen eye sockets as more tears fell from them. The green in her eyes was a frightening red, showing that blood vessels were ruptured around her eyes as a result of the merciless punches to her head. Her once cute and petite nose was a solid black and blood stained her nostrils, showing it was broken. Her upper lip was sliced open and dried blood covered the wound, keeping it a haunting black color while her lower lip was fat and purple. Konata's left side of her face was so badly bruised, Kagami couldn't even see her signature mole beneath her eye anymore. Konata's left ear was terribly swollen and the lobe was sliced open from the barrage of physical attacks. Black, blue and slight greenish colors were wrapped around her neck like a scarf and more blood vessels were broken around the area of strangulation. Konata's right eyebrow was also swollen from the attacks and Kagami tried to take it all in. Fresh blood still leaked from Konata's mouth and Kagami placed her soft fingers on Konata's pulsing lips and lifted them up as she continued to cry in pain. Three teeth from inside Konata's mouth were missing while one of her front ones was badly chipped.

Falling to her knees, Kagami released her tears with quiet dignity and kept trying in vain to convince herself that this was only a putrid nightmare. Kagami regardless opened her arms again in an inviting way and Konata was hesitant at first as she continued to cry and hold the sheet close to her face. It was Konata's unquenchable desire to feel loved and comforted that made her slowly inch closer to Kagami until the twin-tailed woman collected her and held her in her lap.

Rocking her back and forth gently as Konata continued to cry relentlessly, Kagami stared into space as the water continued to pour from her eyes. Feeling that her entire mentality was just ripped from her body, Kagami

whispered, "Oh, no, no, no, no, no...my Konata...my precious, beautiful Konata."

A third person suddenly gasped in horror from the bathroom entrance but Kagami recognized the voice to belong to Miyuki. Miyuki quickly turned and screamed, "I need a gurney and some help in here!"

Kagami continued to hold the love of her life as Konata continued to cry loudly into her bosom. How could anyone sink so low? For a man to hit a woman at all was considered horrendously grotesque and monstrous, but for a healthy, able-bodied man to beat a sick and dying woman to a bloody pulp that left her borderline unrecognizable? The only two words that could even only begin to touch this crossed line were "inhuman" and "evil." Koichi Shido surrendered his status as a moral person and a man when he abused Kagami, but now he had just surrendered his own status of being able to be labeled as a human at all. Kagami knew this man and pictured how this unforgivable assault happened. He could see this devil's face in her mind as he held Konata down with one arm and beat her senseless with the other. He was smiling every time he hit the blue-haired woman and with every tear that escaped Konata's eyes, it only deepened his joy.

A team of nurses and doctors suddenly rushed into the room with a gurney and some screamed when they saw Konata. At first, Kagami was unwilling to surrender the bundle she loved and held in her arms. It took Miyuki's soothing voice to persuade Kagami to part with Konata and more doctors helped the still crying blue-haired woman onto the gurney and they wheeled her away to help.

Kagami still sat on the bathroom floor, her eyes' emotions were burned out and they now looked like two coals. Her buttoned shirt was now stained

with blood and tears around her breasts and her tears fell from her face and added to the piece of emotionally broken apparel. Miyuki knelt down to Kagami, also clearly fighting the urge to vomit into the toilet next to Kagami.

"Kagami-san...what happened here? Who did this?" She asked in a futile attempt to keep her voice solid and strong.

Staring into space with her dark and frozen eyes, Kagami's only response was, "The devil."

Miyuki gulped. "I'll call the police and we'll launch an investigation. Whoever did this is going to rot, I promise you, Kagami-san."

The pink-haired doctor stood and turned to walk out before Kagami's broken voice asked, "Did you find a cure yet, Miyuki?"

Miyuki gulped again. She didn't say whether she did or she didn't. She ignored Kagami and continued to walk out of the room. However, Miyuki did answer Kagami, but she only had the strength to do it inside her head where Kagami couldn't hear.

Yes, Kagami-san, I think I have found a cure. Unfortunately, I think I have.

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Taking a deep breath and trying to calm herself after seeing her high school friend in such a physically damaged state only a few minutes ago, Miyuki tried desperately to hold herself together. On top of her final solution for Konata and Yutaka, she struggled to comprehend who or what could've done such a barbaric act on the ailing blue-haired woman. Things only got worse for Konata and Miyuki heard that there was more damage done to her aside from the massacre on her face. Konata had a broken left hand that the doctors said was from putting up a fight, as well as two fractured ribs, two broken fingers on her right hand, and a fractured ulna in her right arm. In Miyuki's mind, whoever did that had literally zero humanity in them and maybe even hoped that Konata had died from the attack.

Trying to keep her focus on her work, Miyuki tried to run from the obvious by checking and rechecking her already accurate results on how to fix the two women. She remembered that she was so distraught initially by them that she sent them to her husband back in Sweden, hoping he could find some flaw in her findings. In the back of her mind however, she knew that she was unfortunately correct in her work and was basically asking her husband to call her to tell her that two plus two didn't equal four.

After skimming through her work several times, her cell phone suddenly began ringing and she snatched it. Staring at the screen, she smiled and her heart warmed when she saw it was her husband calling. She put the phone on speaker mode and answered it while putting it back on the desk.

"Good evening, dear." Miyuki said.

"And a good morning to you, sweetheart." Her husband, Dr. Jakob Broden replied. "I've been looking over the materials you sent me all day and I'm afraid you're not going to like my answer."

Miyuki sighed deeply and took her glasses off to rub her eyes. "I had a feeling you were going to tell me that. I'm so upset that this case is going to have to end the way it will. When I came here, I was so optimistic about this and I was able to convince myself the whole way over here that I would be able to make the impossible happen."

"I know, Miyuki, I know. These two girls mean a lot to you. Ever since we got married and you got your Swedish citizenship, I remember how many

stories you would tell me about them." Jakob replied. "It always made me smile to hear of how kindly you spoke of them. It was that kind personality that I fell in love with even when I first laid eyes on you at your first conference here in Stockholm."

Miyuki smiled. "Thank you, dear. But I must confess...it sometimes took so much out of me to act so kindly to others. Remember when I first introduced you to Tsukasa when she came to visit us?"

"I do."

"When she was raped all those years ago, my first thought was I wanted to kill those men who did that to her. I was so upset that I couldn't stop crying for a week after it happened. I cried for my friend and because I never knew I could feel such hatred for someone." Miyuki continued. "It made me question so much about myself, especially if I was even qualified to be a doctor. What if I would be forced to treat a rapist or some kind of criminal for whatever reason? I don't think I would be able to do that."

"Yes you would, honey." Jakob quickly replied. "You would because you're not only a professional, you are truly the most incredible and loving woman I have ever known and I know that you don't have a single drop of bad blood in your body. But I cannot help but make one observation, Miyuki."

Miyuki glanced at her phone sitting on the desk, as if she was trying to look her husband in the eyes as he continued.

"You didn't call me because you honestly thought I could show you a mistake in your medical work, right?" He asked and Miyuki lowered her head with remorse.

"Was it that obvious?"

"I'm afraid so. You were calling just so we could talk and I could keep you going."

Miyuki subconsciously moved a hand over to her stomach and began to rub. "You know me pretty well, Jakob."

"Of course I do. Who do you think you're talking to, Miyuki? I'm your husband, the one who loves you with everything he's got and I thank God everyday that you're with me." He continued. "I remember one colleague of mine didn't think you were good enough for me when we were still dating and I said that he had it backwards. I told him that I was the one that wasn't good enough but you still stayed with me anyway."

Hearing this new revelation made Miyuki both happy and sad. She wanted to be home with him now but she knew she still had a job to finish.

"You've been working very hard on this case, haven't you?" Jakob asked.

"It was nothing. It's my job after all." Miyuki quickly replied as she rubbed her stomach.

"It's okay now. Let it go." Jakob added.

Miyuki looked at the phone with confusion. "Let it go? You mean these test results for Konata and Yutaka?"

"You worked so hard, Miyuki. You did your best and went above and beyond the call of duty to help the ones you love, but you must remember, not all stories have happy endings." Her husband replied. "No matter what happens from here on out, you know I'll always be here for you. I'll always love you and I'm just sitting here in bed waiting for you to come home to me. I know that when you finally tell your friends how this story is going to end for them and you feel that there's nothing else you can do except cry, I'll be here by your side. Forever. Don't you ever forget that, sweetheart."

Miyuki felt her eyes tighten and they began to flood. She let her tears run down her face and sobbed quietly until she replied. "Jakob...thank you. And I just need to tell you one more thing."

"What's that, dear?" He asked.

Still rubbing her stomach, Miyuki took a deep breath and confessed. "I'm pregnant."

"Please don't tell me such things, Kagami. I may not be a cop, but I'm still obligated to report any potential threats as I see fit. Now listen, you are not to blame for what happened to Konata and I know for a fact that she doesn't blame you either." Yui quickly countered as Kagami continued to hang her head in shame. "I know he's a bad man and all, but I have a hard time seeing him as the type that would do this to Konata or murder your father. When Konata got the news that your father died, she asked me to run a background check on Shido. I was reluctant at first but I did for her and I was surprised at what I found."

Kagami looked up. "What was it?"

Yui shook her head. "Nothing. The man is as clean as a whistle. No felonies, misdemeanors, no moving violations, not even a single parking ticket. Shido has a cleaner record than most politicians do."

"That's...that's impossible." Kagami stuttered. "How could a man as depraved and evil as him have such a clean record?"

"It actually gets weirder if you can believe it. Shido is the nephew of my former Chief of Police." Yui added, making Kagami's eyes twitch. "It was the chief who was also my boss that actually pulled a few strings and was able to get Shido into Waseda University for his Law pursuits."

Hearing this only furthered Kagami's dismay. "So all of that means..."

"Shido is basically untouchable no matter what you do. Unless you're able to hold solid, credible evidence that came from his own mouth that he committed these crimes in your hands, no police officer in Japan will investigate him." Yui said with remorse.

Kagami was dumbfounded. "How?"

"How what?"

"How is all of this possible? How is someone who comes from a background as elite as Shido able to commit these things? What happened in his life that made him go so wrong and become so evil?" Kagami asked herself. "He simply goes against human nature and logic. No one in their right mind would risk all of what he's done just to attain power."

"I'm afraid you're wrong there, Kagami." Yui said.

"Wrong?"

Yui nodded again. "When I was a cop, I saw some of the very worst society had to offer. People did things to each other that you would only see in your nightmares. I remember one case I worked on before switching to traffic laws where a man set his own house on fire with his wife and sleeping baby inside to collect the home and life insurance payoffs. My point is that humans can be animals underneath if the opportunity to attain wealth and power presents itself. If Shido did all you're accusing him of, it's for that reason. It's irrelevant if he comes from a distinguished and honorable

background; it still doesn't take away from the fact that he can still be corrupted by power and greed. If he did that to Konata, he sees you as a threat to him that must be destroyed by any means necessary, even if you yourself are not physically destroyed."

Kagami nodded. "I understand...but I wish it was me he did that to. He's hit me before, but he never was that merciless or violent to me. But still, something needs to be done. I need to do something."

Kagami quickly stood and Yui acted. "Kagami, I must warn you that if you take the law into your own hands, there will be consequences. Think about what you're doing. Think about Konata."

"I am. I will give her justice." Kagami retorted.

Yui however continued to try and save Kagami from herself. "Okay, you just gave Konata justice by what, hacking Shido's head open with an axe so now what? The police would arrest you for murder and you would find yourself in the exact same position that your mother's in right now. Ask yourself, Kagami, how is that helping Konata? She's still sick and she needs you by her side, not in a jail cell."

Kagami's legs melted and she slumped back into her chair and started crying again. "You're right, Yui. You're right. I just feel so helpless now. I couldn't stop Konata from becoming sick, and now I couldn't protect her from this crime."

Yui scooted over to Kagami and embraced her as the twin-tailed woman continued to cry. The former police officer did the best she could to comfort her but this was a truly awful situation for everyone involved.

"Listen, Kagami. You are an incredible woman who I'm proud to have in my life because I can honestly see how much you love my cousin and it's because of that that I'm choosing to step aside and let you two live in peace." Yui said as she pulled away from embracing the crying Kagami. "I can also promise you that if Shido steps out of line just once, even if it's just for jaywalking, I'll come down on top of him and we'll get to the bottom of this once and for all. If what you're saying is true, he has to slip up sooner or later and when he does, we'll be there."

Kagami nodded and embraced Yui again. Although Shido had flawless credentials to back him up, Kagami knew that what Shido was trying to accomplish was too grave and sooner or later, he would burn one too many bridges or step on the toes of someone he would later regret. She had faith in her friends in the law field and hoped that they still had her back. She also knew that Shido's greed had to catch up soon because of the complaints she's been hearing coming out of her former firm about where money had been disappearing to.

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Later that day, Kagami and Yui were surprisingly both called by Miyuki to appear at the hospital. She didn't want to tell them why she needed to see them over the phone, except that it was urgent and they needed to come as quickly as possible. Kagami didn't know whether to interpret that as good news or bad news because both would only be appropriate to be delivered in person.

Regardless, Kagami couldn't be restrained when she was allowed back in the hospital to see Konata. Sitting next to her as she rested in her bed, Kagami tried to stay strong when she first saw all the bandages and casts wrapped around the blue-haired woman's petite body. The bruises were still clearly visible and Konata continued to groan every now and then from the pain while Kagami continued to hold her cast-covered hand and sob lightly on it. Yutaka was also there and crying over her battered cousin as Minami also watched with loving and supporting eyes. Aside from Konata's groaning, the whole room was silent for her, Kagami, Yutaka, Minami, and Yui.

When the hospital room door opened and Miyuki stepped in, she was holding a file that held her final report for them. Dead silence continued to fill the room as Miyuki took a seat in front of all of them and slowly opened it and was even slower to page through it, telling them that she was still trying to muster the strength to deliver the news to them.

"Well then," her usual soft voice suddenly startled them as she cleared her throat again. "I called you all back here to tell you I have made a conclusion regarding my medical work and all the tests I've performed on you. Konata-san and Yutaka-san may have the same disease but it was still going in two opposite directions but I was able to pinpoint where it would ultimately strike that would be the final blow against you. This is what my final report says."

Everyone gulped and all five women joined hands.

"Konata-san...I can cure you...but Yutaka-san...I'm afraid there's nothing I can do for you." Miyuki said with deep remorse.

It was Earth-shattering news but before Yutaka could cry into Minami's chest, Miyuki continued.

"However...Yutaka-san...I can also cure you...but Konata-san...I'm sorry, but there's nothing else I'll be able to do for you." She said.

Everyone shot confused looks at Miyuki. "Is...is this some kind of joke, Miyuki? This isn't funny!" Kagami shouted.

Hearing her voice echo in the room made Miyuki cringe as breaking this news was going to be harder than she thought as she continued. "The results from Yutaka's liver tell me that I can save Konata-san because of this disease's course. For Konata-san, once this disease hits her liver, that will be the final place it'll hit and she will die but I can short-circuit this disease if I can transplant the enzymes from Yutaka-san's liver to Konata-san. However, the last place this disease is going to attack Yutaka-san before it kills her will be her lungs but I can short-circuit the disease in her if I can transplant Konata-san's lung enzymes to her."

Kagami had a sinking feeling she knew where this was going and when she saw Minami cover her face and begin to sob quietly into it, she knew she was right.

"Konata-san, Yutaka-san, please brace yourselves for this. I can save one of you...but not the other." Miyuki's emotions were beginning to crumble.

Konata and Yutaka looked at each other. Yutaka took the initiative and asked, "But...how do we know which one?"

Miyuki covered her face with the report and continued to sob. "I need to ask you two to do the impossible. You two must decide between yourselves who will live...and who will die. I'll need to take either Yutaka-san's liver out to save Konata-san, or I'll need to take both Konata-san's lungs out to save Yutaka-san. There's no time to put any of you on a donor list because that'll take months, which we don't have anymore."

Yutaka quickly buried her face into Minami's stomach and cried and the green-haired woman was there to catch her. Kagami held Konata's hand as a tear escaped the quiet blue-haired woman's swollen eye socket and Yui watched everything unfold with such devastation. She couldn't help but ask the same question Konata and Kagami had been asking themselves for so long already.

Why?

CHAPTER 18

At the request of Konata, Kagami left the hospital again to give the blue-haired woman and her cousin some much needed alone time. They had a very important issue to talk about while Kagami decided she also had an important errand to run. The twin-tailed woman knew that regardless of how this situation between Konata and Yutaka ended, Shido would forever be circling above her like the vulture he was and waiting for the next opportunity to hurt her. In Kagami's mind, she was convinced that if Shido could execute such brutality against Konata, what was stopping him from doing something similar or worse to her niece and nephews? It was this thinking that led her to his apartment.

Her heart was pounding and she felt sweat form across her forehead as she entered the luxurious apartment complex, similar to the one she lived in. She didn't even bother ringing his buzzer and went straight to the top floor where his penthouse style apartment was and Kagami tried to keep herself calm by talking to herself in her mind.

It's okay. You are the one who is control of this situation. You are strong. Konata gives you the strength to stand and fight. If he gets violent or tries to have his way with you, kill him.

Standing outside his door was like standing outside the Gates of Hell as she raised her clenched fist and pounded on the door. It didn't take long until he opened the door and when he saw who it was, he grinned. He stood above Kagami, a towering pillar of pure evil and the twin-tailed woman felt a sudden drop in the hallway temperature when she saw the blacks of his pupils.

"Well, well, well. What do we have here?" He asked with an evil sneer.

"Your worst nightmare unfolding before your eyes." Kagami quickly retorted as she held her ground despite her shorter height.

Shido huffed as he stood in the doorway. "I should hardly think so, Kagami. Either way, you look cold so would you like to come in?"

Kagami kept her glare and nodded.

In a warm though sarcastic gesture, Shido stepped aside and allowed Kagami to step into his lair and he closed the door behind him. The twin-tailed woman still showed no fear for the man, even when he closed the door behind him and the echo sounding like an iron bar door in a prison slamming shut.

"So what can I do for you, Kagami? Would you like a drink or maybe some hors d'oeuvres? Perhaps some legal advice?" He asked.

"Can it, Shido. You know why I'm here. You have to answer for Konata and my father." She snapped. "You've enjoyed your freedoms for far too long and I'm not going to let you continue to live your life while my mother is taking your place in jail. You're one evil son of a bitch."

Shido rolled his eyes. "I can honestly say I have no idea what you're talking about, Kagami. However, I will admit that I am growing tired of these accusations you continue to throw at me. You must accept the fact that your

mother is a murderer and move on. If I were you, I'd be more concerned about the fact that Aito and Kiyora believe that you're responsible because of your lust for other women."

Kagami's eye twitched. "All I'll say on that matter is that I thank the gods everyday that Tsukasa is their mother because your horrid attempt at using them has failed. They still love me but more importantly they know that I still love them. Best of all, they now know you cannot be trusted and if they saw your face again, they would treat you like a stranger and run away."

Shido huffed again. "Pity. I was growing kind of fond of those kids. I sure could've used them again in the future. Especially that Aito. He was a real go-getter and was fearless...a lot like me."

Hearing this made Kagami grit her teeth. "My nephew is nothing like you! He possesses something you don't, Shido! A heart!"

"I restate: pity. Regardless, you know you have no evidence of anything, Kagami. It's just you, a lonely and disgraced woman of the Law with a temper and a violent side." Shido said as he folded his arms across his chest. "Why don't you tell me the real reason you're here today."

Kagami glanced away. "I just want to know two things. Why, Shido, why? Why Konata? And how? How could you do something so horrible to her? You're over three times her size already and she's dying of a disease that has made her so weak she can barely stand on her own anymore...and you beat her to a point where I didn't even know I was looking at a human face."

Shido formed a grin that made her blood run cold. "If you want my honest reason why I beat your lover, I just simply want to let you know that I'm the jealous type. Why don't you tell that to the tape recorder that's in your back pocket?"

Hearing this caused Kagami to suddenly panic. Her eyes shot open and her only excuse was, "I...I have to go!"

Kagami made a sprint for Shido's door but her majestic pigtails suddenly became a weapon of her own undoing as Shido latched onto one and pulled with all his might. The sudden and violent act ripped Kagami off her feet as she yelped in pain and treating her like a toy, Shido pulled Kagami back and threw her with all his might and she landed on her stomach on his hardwood floor. Before she could spring to her feet, Shido sat on her legs with his groin up against Kagami's buttocks as she continued to thrash.

When she felt his vice-grip hands grab and begin to feel her buttocks, her anger exploded as she continued to try and free herself while screaming and yelling every cussword and threat imaginable at him. When Kagami was becoming too loud, Shido grabbed her head and held it down on the cold floorboards as he leaned forward to her ear.

"Stop squirming or I'll be forced to crush your skull." He said and continued to feel Kagami's rear until he found the bump he was looking for. He reached into Kagami's back pocket and retracted a digital voice recorder, a red light glowing saying it was recording. "Clever little girl. Clever...but clichéd. Trying to get me to confess on tape so you could run to the cops. Kagami, Kagami, Kagami...I'm very disappointed in you. You still have no respect for me or what I'm capable of. You think I'm as stupid as your American friend, Patricia Martin? Just because she let your little friends

catch her with her pants down before doesn't mean I'm that gullible. I'm not Patricia Martin and you're not Hiyori Tamura."

Shido stopped recording and continued to pin Kagami down to the floor. He still sat on her buttocks while holding her head to the ground as she growled and breathed hard while remaining pinned. Through her gritting teeth, she hissed, "Well, Shido, you have me right where you want me. I can tell you want to rape me in the worst way so here I am, pinned and defenseless, just the way you like your women. So go ahead...fuck me raw."

Staring at his prey, Shido laughed. "You would like that, wouldn't you Kagami? For me to penetrate your womanhood over and over until it bleeds and then you would have everything you would want. Physical evidence of a crime and you would let me have you so you could avenge your woman and father. I should know...I studied Law too. Now I'm going to get off you and when I do, I want to talk and if you choose to fight, the only way you'll leave this apartment will be in a trash bag. Is that understood?"

Kagami continued to growl like a cornered animal but was still smart enough to see the situation she was in. She nodded and Shido quickly lifted himself off her and she scrambled to her feet, still defensive and ready to fight if she had to. When she saw Shido was true to his word and wanted to talk, she tried to relax but it proved hard to see him hold her plan to bust him and he slipped the recorder into his pocket.

"You won't be needing this anymore, dear." He sneered and walked to his dinette set and offered Kagami a chair with a sinister grin.

Kagami was reluctant at first but recognized she was not in any physical danger. If she was, Shido wouldn't have passed the opportunity to either rape her or beat her like he did to Konata. She remained fearless and walked to the chair and slowly sat in it and allowed Shido to push the chair with her in it forward and he took a seat across the table in front of her.

"Now...I can tell you have a lot on your mind so I'll tell you what you want to know." Shido said with a smile. "I believe you already know why I beat Konata into a pathetic pile of shit. It was nothing personal against her...just you. You can also call it payback for what you did to my car."

Kagami's glare tightened. "You're never going to leave us alone, are you, Shido? I'm not a lawyer anymore and I lost my license to practice Law. My dream my whole life and now it's gone. And yet you still cannot let me have this one small thing; a peaceful love life. Why?"

"That may have been your initial dream...but that worthless blue-haired has changed you, Kagami. She's given you another dream and every time I see you happy, I feel utterly repulsed and my mission in life is to see everything you love turn to dust." Shido replied as he connected his hands and rested his two index fingers on his lips. "As far as I'm concerned, the sooner you both disappear, the easier it'll make my life."

My god...Yui was right. He does see me as a threat.

"Why did you kill my father?" Kagami asked bluntly as she crossed her arms across her chest and crossed her legs.

Shido sighed. "It was a simple reason really. While I was able to fool everyone else in your family into thinking I was a gift to them, I was never able to convince your father of this. He saw right through me the moment you first brought me to your family's shrine and I met Aito and Kiyora for the first time, as well as your sisters and mother. I will admit though, Tadao was a smart man...perhaps a little too smart. And in the end, it was his high intuition as a father that made me see my plan to take your firm was in jeopardy. That's why I poisoned his coffee and framed your good-hearted but still naïve mother."

Damn...I wish I brought two voice recorders.

"Listen to me, Shido. No matter how long it may take me, I will bust you for murdering my father and doing that to Konata." Kagami's stern voice said. "However, I must admit that I still cannot rule out the idea of leaping across this table and wrapping my hands around your neck and squeezing until your eyeballs explode."

"Go ahead, Kagami. I invite you to kill me now." Shido said and to her surprise, he slowly stood and walked to a kitchen drawer, opened it, and to Kagami's sudden fear, he pulled out a large kitchen knife and returned to the table. He placed the knife on the long table and slid it across the table until it stopped in front of Kagami. "Take it and cut my throat or gut me like a fish...whichever tickles your fancy. However, as one lawyer to a former lawyer, you know how that would end for you."

"The police would arrest me and charge me with murder." Kagami replied as she looked up from the knife and disregarded it. "Because I have a history of violent tempers as the police are already aware of either from

high school or when they told me about my father's death and I accused you for the whole firm to see."

Shido nodded. "And let's not forget about that so-called love of your life in the hospital. You claim to love her, yet I still can't believe how easy you made it for me to nearly take her away from you. You weren't there to protect her then...so what do you think I'll do to her and that little salmon-haired cousin of hers when you're with your mother in jail? Did you know that for a brief moment...I was considering penetrating your lover between her legs with a scalpel as she begged for mercy and cried? I never knew such looks of fear and pain existed in anybody so I must admit...that was a real treat."

A maelstrom of pure anger and hate burned in Kagami's eyes as she clenched her fists. Shido was trying to get her to change her mind about picking up that knife.

"That Konata of yours; she's so small so I wonder if I chose to make her my slave right there on the hospital bed how much she could've took before her entire body broke into pieces. If history is any indicator of how easy it was to break you in the bedroom, my guess would be only four thrusts and I would've destroyed Konata's loins forever." Shido added, keeping his eyes in a satisfied squint.

More sweat formed across Kagami's head as her leg began to tremble and her hand began to inch closer and closer to the knife. As her fingertips touched the knife's handle, she looked up and saw Shido's face. He was hoping he would do it. He wanted to make himself into a martyr if it meant Kagami would be put away forever and Konata would be left to die alone and scared. She took a deep breath and slowly stood.

"This visit is over. Even though I'm not a lawyer anymore, I still have more respect for the Law than you ever have or will and I'm going to take you down the best way I know how. Legally." Kagami finished and began to walk calmly towards the door.

As she neared it, Shido stood and turned to her. "Oh before you go, Kagami, I actually have a gift for you."

Kagami turned and looked at him. "A gift? Is it a written confession addressed to the police?"

Shido smirked. "Even better. It's something that actually belongs to Konata so I figured she would want them back."

The tall corrupt man reached into his jacket pocket and to Kagami's surprise, he pulled out a small pink lace bag tied at the top with a red ribbon. He untied the red ribbon and furthering Kagami's confusion, he tossed the open bag and it landed on the floor in front of the twin-tailed woman, allowing the three individual contents to spill out. They looked like three white rocks on Shido's hardwood floor but when Kagami saw them more closely, she felt sick again. Three human teeth sat on the floor, one stained with blood. Konata's three missing teeth.

Kagami looked up again, her pools of sheer hate and anger swirling in her eyes. "You're sick...you're going to Hell."

Shido smiled again. "Then I'll be seeing Konata again as I already put her there once."

Without saying another word, Kagami ripped the apartment door open and dashed out of the hellish nightmare room. Running as fast as she could down the hallway, Kagami continued to regret every second she ever spent with that "man" and continued to feel used and repulsed that she used to lay on her back and let him do what he pleased. As she continued to run, she only had one thought in her mind.

I'm so sorry, Konata. I don't deserve you.

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Alone she rested in her bed as she held an old photograph of when she was a baby. Yutaka Kobayakawa stared through her tear-soaked eyes at the picture of her older cousin Konata also at an early age and the blue-haired child held the sleeping Yutaka in her petite arms while smiling. It was just the two of them together in the image and Yutaka quickly moved the picture out of the way as another water droplet fell from her eyes. No matter how this situation was going to end for her, she was going to lose her cousin.

A knock was suddenly heard on the door and Yutaka quickly hid the photo under her bed sheet and said, "Come in."

The door opened and Yutaka felt more comforted when she saw both Minami Iwasaki and her sister Yui enter the room. Both pulled chairs closer

to Yutaka on both sides of her bed and sat down next to her while Yui informed, "Well, Konata kicked us out so we figured we'd come here."

Yutaka gave a perplexed look. "She...she kicked you out? Why?"

Yui shrugged. "She said she wanted to think about a few things and needed privacy. Between us, we think she's thinking about...what Miyuki said. About...that choice that has to be made."

Yutaka quickly averted her eyes from her older sister. "I guess I have to make a choice, too."

Minami and Yui gulped simultaneously. Minami cleared her throat and scooted forward to Yutaka. "Listen, Yutaka. I know that this is an impossible situation and I cannot even begin to imagine what you're feeling right now. You're a lot braver than I would be and I just want you to know that—"

"I'll do it." Yutaka said.

"What?" Minami asked as Yui's face turned red in anticipation of what was coming next.

"I said I'll do it. I'll be the one who dies...for Konata." Yutaka said and lowered her head.

Yui quickly covered her face in a futile attempt to hide her shattered emotions. Her brain suddenly began to replay all of the precious memories of her and her little sister. She saw herself holding her baby sister for the first time at the hospital when she was born, Yutaka's first signs of a weak and frail constitution, her years as a pre-teen, her days in high school, college, and beyond.

Minami took her hand and quickly began to rub at as her eyes also filled with tears. As she rubbed her hand, all the green-haired woman could utter was Yutaka's name.

"Yutaka, please think about what you're doing." Yui suddenly said. "This... this isn't the only option, you know."

Yutaka quickly turned her head and showed a look of horror. "What...what are you saying?"

"I...I'm saying that...there are...other...options." Yui stuttered as she tried to keep a meltdown away.

Seeing her little sister's eyes narrow to form a frown scared her and when Yutaka became angry, it seemed to only get worse. "Are...are you telling me to let Konata sacrifice herself for me?! You want your own cousin to die to save your sister?!"

Yui covered her face again. "Yutaka, you're my sister! My flesh and blood! Every natural instinct I have is to protect you and to tell you to preserve yourself...but this...this isn't right! Konata is my family too and I should be telling her the same thing! I don't know what to do anymore!"

Yutaka sighed as she watched her sister drop her head on the hospital bed and continue to cry. The sickly woman placed her hand on her older sister's head and rubbed it gently while Minami continued to grip Yutaka's other hand. Her situation may have been dire, but Yutaka still felt comforted with all the love and sympathy that was surrounding her on all sides but regardless she still had to make a choice, as did Konata. In Yutaka's mind, Konata was most likely also planning the same thing. She was going to try and sacrifice herself so Yutaka could live.

"Go get a drink, Yui." Yutaka said calmly and dug her hand under her sister's buried face and lifted it up with her hand under the chin. "Go calm yourself down and let me speak with Minami for awhile."

Minami's ears perked up upon hearing this. It took several attempts to convince Yui to leave but she eventually caved to her sister's request and left her alone with Yutaka's friend and nurse. Feeling nervous, Minami took a deep breath when they were finally alone and said, "What can I do for you, Yutaka?"

"I wanted to say that I'm sorry, Minami. I'm sorry." Yutaka blatantly stated as she rested on her back and stared at the ceiling.

The green-haired nurse didn't expect that to be the first thing Yutaka said, especially when she said it with so much sincerity. Minami had been a nurse for a long time now and she dealt with a lot of unique cases and circumstances. Regrettably, she also saw her fair share of death and was there to see other family members cry over their loved ones as they died in front of them. In those cases, she also saw family members confess secrets to each other and they ranged from everything to secret affairs, to not following through on certain commitments, or even something as simple as sharing old memories. Minami looked down at her salmon-haired friend and wondered what she was about to divulge, especially by opening with an apology.

"Sor...sorry? Sorry for what?" Minami asked with confusion.

Yutaka took a deep breath. "I'm sorry for leaving you all those years ago. When Tsukasa gave me a job with her, I leaped at the opportunity with so much enthusiasm, I forgot all about you and our other friends. I regretted the way I treated you ever since."

Minami searched her memory. So much had happened since they were in high school together and Minami remembered that she "coincidentally" went to the same college as Yutaka. Even though Minami's grades would've allowed her to go to a school that had better nursing programs, she still chose to follow Yutaka to a school that specialized in liberal arts. The green-haired woman would never admit it, but she was grateful everyday that she had Yutaka with her in school. It broke her heart though when they both graduated and Yutaka began to travel the world with Tsukasa.

"Oh...you...you don't have to apologize, Yutaka. I'm happy for you and the opportunities you got." Minami said calmly.

"But I still know how much I hurt you. Remember when we first met in high school?" Yutaka asked, still keeping her eyes looking upward.

Minami nodded.

"I could tell right away when I looked up at you for the first time that you were the same as I was which was why I was so excited that we became friends." Yutaka replied. "I could tell that you were lonely...just like me. When I was in grade and middle school, I was sick all the time so I never had any real friends. You were my first real friend and I cherished you deeply throughout high school. But on top of that...I knew everything about you just by looking into your eyes, Minami."

Minami remained silent.

"You were lonely in school, too, weren't you?" Yutaka began to open an old wound for Minami. "You were the tallest in every class of every year and as we got older...girls began to make fun of your flat chest, didn't they? You wanted the same thing I wanted...a normal life. I could feel that every time I looked at you and I thought that if we stuck together, we could be stronger. But when I saw this opportunity, I forgot everything because I saw it as my ticket to a new life. After I started traveling, we slowly began to lose contact with each other until we stopped talking altogether. When you came here and became my nurse, that was the first time I saw you in years and I was incredibly grateful to Konata for that because now I can say it. I'm so sorry I left you because I know how much our friendship meant to you as well. It was also this disease that made me learn a lesson the hard way. You need to cherish people when you have them because you don't know when

they'll be gone. You need to love people now and be as close to them as possible, no matter how remote, because you won't get a chance when they're gone. So for just simply forgetting about you, Minami, I'm so sorry. Please forgive me."

Tears formed in Minami's eyes and she pulled Yutaka's hand to her face and began to sob lightly on it. "You...you don't have to apologize for that. Even though I was sad when you left, I was still happy for you. And you're right. I did value our friendship a lot and I saw you as the little sister I wish I had. I love you, Yutaka, and I cannot accept your apology...because there's nothing to forgive. I just wish that you didn't have to leave me like this... but I respect your decision to save Konata. I don't know what I'm going to do when you're gone."

Yutaka turned her head and saw Minami was still crying over this devastating situation and sighed. The sick woman sat up and embraced her friend around her head and kissed her on the top of it as Minami continued to weep. She did her best to comfort Minami but there was only so much she could do in this black-and-white scenario that was going to end badly for them.

"I want you to live on, Minami. The best way you'll be able to honor my memory is to get up every day and do your job because there will be others who will need you." Yutaka stated. "Please...you have to remain strong."

It suddenly clicked in Minami's head. She remembered Miyuki asked her to do the same thing a few days ago after Yutaka's liver biopsy; to remain strong. Quickly wiping another tear away, Minami sat up straight and nodded.

Yutaka nodded back and suddenly vocalized one more thing. "Minami... there is actually one thing you could do for me. Would you please bring me some paper and a pen?"

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After yet another tiring and unfulfilling shift at the spa, Patricia Martin was able to punch out for the day. Normally she would stay for awhile longer to relax and avoid her depressing home life, but today she was too tired to even do that. This wasn't the way she pictured how her life was going to go, but then again how many people know exactly where fate is going to take them? With each passing day, Patty regretted her actions against the Hiiragi family even more and every time she had to return home to her dingy apartment with a paycheck that just barely covered the rent, it only made her bad decisions clearer.

So many emotions used to swirl through Patty's mind after she was released from jail when her sentence was up, the biggest ones being anger and hate. Angry because she felt screwed over by the system and everyone around her, and hate for each and every single one of them. Konata for taking sides with the Hiiragi family, Hiyori for tricking her and recording her confession, and everyone else for turning their backs on her even though she still felt that she was the victim after Tsukasa attacked and humiliated her in front of everyone. Her anger and hate only spiked when Kagami and especially Tsukasa made it to the big leagues and became successes while her occupation consisted of sweeping floors and taking out trash.

Now, nearly two decades later, all she could feel was regret. It was Kagami's unexpected visit to her work the other day that made her begin to rethink things. Maybe her grudges were baseless and petty, especially because Tsukasa wasn't in her usual frame of mind when she attacked her. She was the victim of a putrid crime after all so no one could hold it over Tsukasa's head for being pissed and upset about it. It was also how Kagami presented herself to Patty that made the foreign girl see things differently. Not many people would've blamed Kagami if she chose to hold Patty's head underwater until the bubbles stopped but she didn't. Instead, she stayed calm and chose to have a civilized conversation with Patty and was able to discover the root of her anguish because of it. When Patty divulged those memories to Kagami, she suddenly felt better. Kagami unexpectedly provided Patty with something she was in need of for a long time; a pair of ears to listen to her when no one else would.

Patty hopped off the public bus at the stop right outside her apartment building. It was a polar opposite of Kagami's luxurious penthouse as she approached it and saw a fresh wave of new mold forming on one of the outside walls. The structure itself was only two stories tall and looked like it had barely survived a tsunami as the deteriorating paint showed, as well as some of the broken windows covered with plywood and graffiti spray-painted on nearly every side.

Sighing at the fact that this was her life now, Patty reached into her pocket and retracted her keys. Unlocking her door and walking inside the dark apartment, she closed the door behind her and turned on the light switch. The lights above her flickered several times until they stayed lit and as Patty continued her decompressing routine from work, she didn't notice a tall, silent figure sitting in her chair in the corner of her studio apartment.

"Have a nice day?" The figure suddenly spoke.

Patty felt her entire skeleton nearly rip from her body as she jumped, shrieked, and looked up. She was trembling fiercely, which only made her intruder, Koichi Shido, laugh as he stood and approached her.

"Oh Jesus...you scared the shit out of me! How the hell did you get in here?!" Patty cried in her frightened anger.

"Look around you, Patty. You're not exactly living in Buckingham Palace. All I had to do was pick the lock though I could've saved more time if I just chose to kick in your termite-ridden door." Shido snarled as he unbuttoned his suit jacket and reached for his pocket. "I just came by to tell you your service to me is up and here's your reward."

Shido pulled out an envelope and dropped it in front of Patty. It made a loud crash when it hit her table and Patty slowly picked it up and opened it, making her heart race when she saw 500,000 yen sitting inside. For someone like Shido, it was pocket change but for Patty and her income level, it was nothing short of a jackpot and borderline striking it rich.

"Enjoy that money because it's from Kagami's firm. You got your revenge and you got to take 500,000 yen from her in the process so make sure you enjoy it while it lasts." Shido added.

Patty's heart all of a sudden began to feel heavy with feeling. What was this new sensation that now engulfed her heart and soul? If she didn't know any better, she could swear it felt like guilt as she reluctantly took the large sum of money.

"And there is one more thing I think you'll enjoy seeing." Shido happily stated and pulled out his cell phone. "I know you didn't ask this of me, but I felt that since Kagami pissed me off too and given your history with this bitch, I figured you'd like to see karma at its finest."

Shido cued up a video he had taken with his phone and handed it to Patty, who once again reluctantly took it and to her sudden and surprising horror, the still image showed a battered Konata on a hospital bed. Her hand now trembling, Patty slowly reached up and touched the play button, her finger leaving behind sweat residue.

The video played and it showed his one arm holding Konata down by her neck as her face continued to discolor and bleed from her nose and mouth. "Smile and look into the camera, Konata Izumi. Anything you want to say for all who'll be watching this? Maybe an apology or a how it feels to be dying so painfully?"

Konata was clearly beginning to lose consciousness on the video and Shido quickly grabbed her by the hair and yanked her up violently, forcing several grunts of pain from her mouth. "Don't you pass out on me yet you little bitch. Not yet. We're still having too much fun for you to go to sleep."

Konata continued to groan in pain as Shido released his death-grip on her hair and moved his hand to her bloodied and battered face and began to slowly and gently rub it. He suddenly moved his thumb to her right swollen eye socket and pressed with all his might, triggering Konata to yelp louder but she was still too weak and battered to scream, even though the pain would justify it. More blood began to emerge from her eye and around

Shido's thumb until he retracted it as Konata continued to lightly resist as her body was too beaten to fight back anymore.

As the video continued to roll, Shido rubbed Konata's cheek again until he spoke. "What's this? I think I feel a few loose teeth. How about we have a look and see?"

Shido parted Konata's bruised and bleeding lips and saw them. As Patty watched in horror, the last sequence she saw was Shido begin to move his fingers towards Konata's teeth and the blue-haired woman began to cry again in pain, making Patty's reflexes stop the video and look away, her heart pounding and the contents inside her stomach beginning to churn.

"How about that? Not bad for someone who never practiced dentistry a day in his life." Shido laughed maliciously.

Shido took his phone back and Patty continued to tremble in disgust. She felt gripping chills run down her body and she gripped her sides as Shido slipped his phone back into his pocket without a single care in the world. Patty gulped and was barely able to whisper, "I trust that...I'll never see you again, right?"

Shido nodded. "You trust correctly. I would hate to come back to this parasite-infested shithole again so after this, I'll leave you to your pathetic squalor lifestyle. Thanks again for helping me and enjoy your money."

The devil dressed in black began to walk towards Patty's door and she felt her legs go numb and began to make her way to her chair to sit down. Before she could however, Shido stopped again and turned.

"Oh...and thanks again for helping me murder Tadao." Shido laughed.

Patty's heart pounded and she quickly turned. "What the hell are you talking about, Shido?! The newspapers said Miki murdered Tadao!"

Keeping his smirk, Shido turned again and faced Patty. "Think back, my dear. Remember when I asked you to supply me with the names of several household cleaners that you use in your spa?"

Patty began to nod but it suddenly clicked in her mind and she became emotional. "You...you said you had a Jacuzzi installed in your apartment and wanted to clean it yourself!"

Shido laughed. "Ah yes, I did say that. Well my dear...I lied."

A look of pure devastation and anguish plastered itself across Patty's face as she gripped her head and tears formed in her eyes. With a voice full of panic, she squeaked, "Then...then that means that I'm...I'm..."

"An accomplice to murder." Shido smirked. "If I go down, I'll be taking you with me. I'm a man of insurance and thinking ahead, Patty. So now matter

what, you'll always be a part of me, just like your old friend, Ayano Minegishi."

Patty slumped to the floor and released her tears. "You're a...you're a..."

"When you think of a noun, you know where to find me. Until I need you again, my dear." Shido said cunningly and maliciously and left Patty's apartment.

Feeling gutted and defeated, Patty suddenly remembered what Kagami said to her the day she confronted her at her spa.

I'm going to let you alone in peace...because that's what my father would've wanted.

Feeling sick to her stomach, Patty covered her eyes with her hands and began to cry. As she wept, the only things she could vocalize was, "Oh god...what have I done? I'm sorry, Kagami! I'm so sorry!"

A/N: Out of all of them, I think this is my least favorite chapter but necessary for later as we're slowly approaching the end of the story so stay tuned and as always thanks for reading!

CHAPTER 19

"I wish you would stay away from that piece of shit," Konata snapped. "Every time you go and confront him, you're putting yourself in danger and worse you could be risking your own life. Plus he's always two moves ahead of all of us and he seems invincible."

Kagami sat next to Konata with her legs crossed. She continued to stare at her blue-haired lover, still bandaged and bruised from Shido's attack. "You don't seem to understand, Konata, even with you looking the way you do. Shido is never going to leave either of us alone. He won't stop until he's destroyed me and everything that I love so I have to keep challenging him because sooner or later he will expose himself for the criminal that he is."

"But you don't have to turn yourself into a martyr in the process. I mean for Christ's sake, Kagami, you were actually going to let him rape you if it meant you could take him down that way?" Konata continued to pushback at Kagami. "That's not the Kagami I fell in love with. I fell in love with the Kagami who uses her head, not her body to conquer challenges. It's one of the countless traits that makes you that much more special to me."

Sighing deeply, Kagami scooted her chair closer to Konata and collected her hands in hers and kissed them lightly and gently. Her left hand was still in a cast from Shido's attack and as Kagami continued to stare and analyze all the heart-wrenching marks, she whispered, "Does it still hurt?"

Konata reared her feminine side again for Kagami's sake and gently shook her head while replying in a soft voice. "I'm okay. Still a little sore in some parts but don't worry about me. I don't blame you for what happened. I bet

Shido tried to make you think that you weren't here to protect me or something."

Seeing Kagami's lips tremble confirmed this for her and Konata kissed her lover lightly on the head to reassure her. The blue-haired woman continued to whisper reassuring things to Kagami and to act as her balance against the lies that Shido relentlessly tried to feed her for not protecting Konata. There was still one thing on Kagami's mind that she needed to address with Konata, but she just didn't have it in her to bring it up. She hoped that Konata would do it for her but her overbearing emotions got the better of her and Kagami pulled away.

"There is another thing I want to talk to you about." Kagami said quietly and submissively, telling Konata that this was going to be a touchy subject. "I want to know what your...plans are."

Konata knew what she was talking about instantly. "You mean about Yutaka and I?"

Kagami nodded.

Shifting her green eyes away, Konata sighed. "Well, if you must know, I do have a plan. I was planning on telling Yutaka that I'll do it. I'll be the one who goes to sleep...and not wakeup if it'll save her."

In the back of her mind Kagami had a feeling this was coming but it still didn't soften the blow. Kagami felt her heart clench and she gripped her

chest as the pain continued to swallow her and her tears mounted. This was becoming too redundant and she didn't know how much more of this she could take as she looked back up at Konata, still looking downward at the foot of her bed.

"...Konata..."

"I know what you're thinking. You're probably thinking that I should reconsider and that maybe I should let Yutaka take the plunge for me because we love and need each other. After all, we're a couple but Yutaka is single, isn't a mother, and has been sick her whole life so society might deem me as more 'valuable'...but I know you cannot say it because it's just too damn horrible." Konata opened up. "I have no doubt in my mind that Yui and Minami are probably trying to convince Yutaka of the same thing and this is when people will rear their darkest sides. When the chips begin to fall and worlds are about to collapse, even friends and family will eat each other. But I'm not like that, Kagami. I'm above those petty beliefs that self-preservation must occur at any and all costs."

"But...Konata..." Kagami began as her tears slid down her face.

"But nothing, Kagami." Konata sharply stated. "Let me explain something to you and when I'm done, I want you to put yourself in my position. I never knew my mother and it was just me and my dad, which was always fine with me, but it still left a void that only another woman, a mother, could fill. I wanted another figure like that in my life and that's why Yui always came and visited me; to act as a mother figure for me while my dad mourned my mother's passing. But when Yutaka started to live with me, I was given something else that I always wanted; a sister. Now let me ask you

something, Kagami. Let's say you're in my position now and Tsukasa is in Yutaka's position. Would you die to save your sister?"

Hearing this analysis from Konata's point of view shed new light on the quagmire for Kagami and it only made her feel worse. Not because of what was happening, but because she knew Konata was right. Kagami searched her soul but it didn't take long for her to quickly conclude that yes, she would sacrifice her own life if it meant Tsukasa would be spared.

"I always envied you and Tsukasa for being so close. One of my childhood dreams before I truly committed myself to the otaku lifestyle was to have a whole family with a mother and even a sister. That was my earliest dream." Konata continued. "Both Yui and Yutaka gave that to me and now that's how I see them. Yui as a borderline mother to me and Yutaka for being my sister. I hope you can see this and understand why I want to give myself up so Yutaka can live."

All Kagami could do was utter her name again because she knew Konata had a valid point and the twin-tailed woman could honestly put herself in her shoes and see where she was coming from. If Tsukasa was ever in danger she would go to the ends of the Earth and beyond if it would help her, even if it meant Kagami's demise. Still, Kagami felt cheated.

She wiped her eyes and sat up straight and retorted with a broken voice. "But I still need to tell you, Konata...save yourself. This isn't my sister-side talking; this is the side that is in love with you that's talking. I need you here with me and if you were gone...I don't know what I would do. I want you by my side, Konata. Forever. So I have to ask you to please reconsider and stay with me because you know how much I hate being alone."

Konata cast her eyes upward towards the burning whites of the fluorescent lights above her, as if she was mentally preparing herself to see the white light within the near future. She gulped and replied, "I don't think I'll be able to comply with that one, Kagamin. You know that I love you and that I'll always love you, but this is family. Bloodlines. Something that's impossible to break. No matter how this ends...I need you to promise me something, Kagami."

Still letting her eyes drip water, Kagami continued to listen to Konata.

"I need you to stay strong for me and ultimately Yutaka. Please continue to show her the same respect that you did before this whole god-awful shitty mess ever happened because she'll need you, too. She knows how much you mean to me and she'll need all the support she can get when I'm gone." Konata said with a complacent voice.

It continued to baffle Kagami that Konata remained so calm as she spoke of herself as if her sentence was already final. She didn't know whether to see it as bravery or if Konata was even living in reality anymore. Kagami continued to hope and pray that there was possibly one sliver of hope that Yutaka would take the plunge instead of her lover but every time she thought about it, it only made her feel more guilty for thinking such notions. Kagami didn't want to be the selfish one and keep Konata all to herself and let her lover's cousin die so they could be together, but letting Konata depart this world to save Yutaka wasn't fair either.

Kagami slowly sat back in her chair. "So...so is that it? Are you just going to leave me like this? After all I sacrificed to be with you? After letting the

Board of Directors take away my license to practice Law? I surrendered my own childhood dream to be with you, Konata. Once the Board of Directors makes that decision, it cannot be overruled or turned around. I now have to find a new career and explain why to any future employers. Even with my sisters and family...I don't think I could survive without you. Tsukasa held me up in high school when we were always in separate classes because I knew she depended on me for everything whether it was emotional support or borrowing textbooks. But look at her now; she's so strong and independent and she doesn't need me to be by her side anymore. Now you need me and I need you and you're just going to surrender that? Look me in the eyes, Konata."

Konata hesitated as she continued to stare upwards into the lights.

"I said look at me, Konata!" Kagami yelled.

Still hesitating, Konata finally began to move her head and looked into the drenched eyes and face of Kagami. Seeing such devastation on Kagami's face triggered her own emotions to heat up again.

"Tell me you're leaving me, Konata." She sniffed. "Tell me that after all I've done, sacrificed, and risked for you, you're leaving me. I need to hear it because my heart won't let me believe it."

Letting a single tear escape Konata's eyes, she slowly turned away and looked up at the lights again. "I love you, Kagami. Nothing will ever change that."

Though it wasn't the exact words she expected or anticipated, it still struck hard and deep. Kagami covered her face again and released new waves of tears and outbursts. Konata dared not look at her for if she did, she knew she would begin to have reservations and possibly even second thoughts on giving herself up in exchange for Yutaka's life. She gulped and tried desperately to ignore her girlfriend's weeps of sorrow but it was no good.

Konata knew that sooner or later Miyuki would show up again and tell her that their symptoms were still getting worse and that something needed to be done. Both Konata and Yutaka already knew how this was going to play out in terms of how they would be fixed. The last time they would see each other alive is before they're both put under for Miyuki and the other doctors to perform the surgery. Konata could feel her symptoms inside of her heat up again and it continued to make the reality of it all too real. Hearing Kagami cry next to her without saying another word only made it worse.

Konata began to think of some of the last things she wanted to do before she left Earth. She wanted to see her father one last time obviously but considered the idea of a long bucket list, even though she knew this was an unattainable request as her time was short. There was only one thing she wanted to do and she shifted her head to the crying Kagami again and knew that she would want to do it too. Shifting her weak body closer to Kagami, Konata leaned as close as she could to her ear and whispered.

"Make love to me."

Kagami ceased her crying and slowly looked up, her eyes still a watery spew. A bright red blush was painted across her face and her reflexes triggered her to look around to make sure no one heard her even though

they were both alone. She wiped away another tear and moved closer to whisper back out of instinct as they were in a public place.

"N...now? And...here?" Kagami whispered with reluctance in her voice, though her eyes were full of lust and desire.

Konata nodded and continued to whisper to make Kagami feel more secure. "It's okay...no one else will be here for another two hours. You don't have to worry about hurting me, I'm fine to do it so please, have sex with me, Kagami. Give me one more memory and give me your pleasure so I won't feel any more pain."

Their faces only inches apart and feeling the heat of each other's breath on their lips, it created an exciting mood for both of them but Kagami took one final security measure. She stood and took a doorknob sign hanging on the knob, opened the hospital door, and put it on the doorknob and closed the door and locked it for good measures. The sign hanging outside for any passing nurses said, "EXAMINATION IN PROGRESS. PLEASE DO NOT DISTURB."

Kagami returned to her lover and with no further hesitation gently climbed into bed with her and rested at her side. The two kissed deeply and Kagami pulled Konata close, minding her injuries in the process and pulled the bed sheet over top of them.

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As Yutaka finished eating her lunch later that day, she also finished writing a very lengthy letter with the pen and paper Minami fetched for her. She was able to pack the whole thing into an envelope and she stared at it resting on her lap and waited. There was nothing else to do except for Miyuki to run another test on both her and Konata because she feared that despite the earlier diagnosis's of two and a half months to live, she feared that something may happen to them sooner.

Miyuki noticed something the previous day that she missed in both of them; their hearts. Aside from Yutaka's liver and Konata's lungs, their hearts were basically left untouched and she feared that the next symptom could target their hearts, which if strong enough, would kill them both before they could start their surgeries. Up until now, every worst possible symptom targeted their major organs but the latter three were the ones that Miyuki needed to stay functioning the most and now it was a constant walk on eggshells. She wanted Koanta and Yutaka to take their time in deciding each other's fate, but she didn't know if time would allow it.

As Yutaka continued to sit in her hospital bed and stare at her fat envelope stuffed with her letter, she heard another knock on her door. She smiled at all the visitors she was getting and once again vocalized, "Come in."

She was barely able to finish saying the two word sentence when the door swung open and to her surprise and excitement, Aito and Kiyora rushed into the room, each one carrying gifts. The two children cried "Yu-chan" over and over happily as they climbed onto the bed and Yutaka was overjoyed. Because of how close Yutaka was to Tsukasa, she was automatically close with her children as well and hugged them both tightly.

"Kids! Kids! It's so great to see you! It's so great—look at you! Look at how much you've grown!" Yutaka exclaimed. "Aito, you're becoming quite a strapping young man and Kiyora, my favorite little face I see that little smile of yours!"

As the two kids' voice became storms of white noise, a new voice from the doorway said, "I hope we didn't come at a bad time."

Yutaka looked up and her joy spiked again when she saw Tsukasa standing there and holding a fresh bundle of flowers. The youngest Hiiragi daughter entered as she watched her children continue to bounce on Yutaka's bed and pulled a chair over while resting the flowers on a table.

"Not at all, not at all!" Yutaka proclaimed happily. "I was hoping I would get a visit from you, too!"

Tsukasa nodded and crossed one leg over her other and watched her children. "Aito, Kiyora, be careful with Yutaka. Remember, she's not feeling very well."

"Oh I don't mind, Tsukasa." Yutaka quickly replied. "I haven't seen these two in a long time and look how much they've grown! Why have you two been hiding from me?!"

Aito and Kiyora giggled.

"Get well soon, Yu-chan! Then we can play together again!" The usual shy and reclusive Kiyora announced in a great ball of energy as Tsukasa watched and smiled. Everyone knew it was because Tsukasa was with her that Kiyora was able to vibrantly express herself.

"I won't let you beat me in soccer again, Yu-chan!" Aito announced with pride.

Yutaka giggled. "Well then I guess I'll have to stop letting you win if that's the case!"

As Tsukasa watched the heartwarming scene unfold before her eyes, she thought about all the time she spent with Yutaka and how much she cherished it. Despite the times she became sick overseas, Tsukasa still wouldn't trade any of the time spent with her for a second, especially considering how great Yutaka was with her children. Ever since Shido tried to corrupt their young minds, Tsukasa became even more protective of her children but she trusted Yutaka with her life and the international icon knew the feeling was mutual.

"Oh my goodness, what do we have here?" Another voice said and everyone turned their heads to the doorway again. This time however, Tsukasa quickly stood and felt herself become overrun with emotions.

"...Yuki-chan..." Tsukasa whispered as she looked at Miyuki standing in the doorway in her white lab coat and professional attire underneath while her eyes were still covered with glasses. Her long pink hair was still tied behind her in a ponytail.

Aito and Kiyora were confused at what was happening and it became deeper when they watched their mother form tears in her eyes and walk over to Miyuki. When she saw her hug Miyuki and the doctor hugged her back, they saw Miyuki wasn't a foe but a friend and they became more relaxed.

"Tsukasa...you're so beautiful." Miyuki whispered, also with growing emotions in her voice.

Tsukasa pulled away and held Miyuki's hands while trying not to cry with her children so close to her. "If only I could be half as beautiful as you are...both inside and out."

Miyuki looked at the bed and saw the two gems of Tsukasa's eyes and slowly approached them with her hands folded across her navel. "And who do we have here?"

It suddenly clicked in Tsukasa's mind. Miyuki had never formally met her children before. She had only seen pictures of them but because of their constantly shifting schedules and demanding lifestyles, Miyuki was never able to meet them but always said she wanted to. Smiling, Tsukasa approached her children sitting on Yutaka's bed as Kiyora reared her bashful side again and took shelter behind Aito as Miyuki approached. Even though Tsukasa was there, Kiyora was still always afraid of strangers.

"Aito, Kiyora, this is a very good friend of mommy's. Her name is Dr. Miyuki Broden. Can you say hello?" Tsukasa asked in a sweet-sounding

voice for them.

"Hello." They said together, though Aito was more vocal than his sister as she looked over his shoulder.

"And Dr. Broden, this is my son, Aito, and my daughter, Kiyora." Tsukasa introduced and stepped aside.

Everyone knew that Miyuki was sweet and considerate to everyone beforehand, but in lieu of a recent pregnancy test she took, her maternal instincts went into overdrive as she couldn't help but rub her stomach as she looked at Tsukasa's two precious children. She remembered that when she and her husband made love, they weren't really planning on having children but Miyuki was overjoyed at the pregnancy test result and so was her husband in Sweden.

"Well, the pleasure is all mine." She said sweetly like Tsukasa and placed her hands on her knees and lowered herself to their level. "And I must say it's great to finally meet you both. Such a handsome young man and such a pretty young lady."

Miyuki's overall charming and sweet atmosphere was felt by the children and their natural instincts made them more comfortable around her. She had a natural maternal aura around her, making them feel more at ease near her. Even Kiyora slowly stood above her brother and even began to take the initiative of meeting Miyuki, something Tsukasa had never seen before in her daughter. Tsukasa simply stood and watched in awe as Kiyora approached Miyuki.

"You're a friend of mommy?" She asked inquisitively and innocently with her big eyes. "You have very pretty hair."

Miyuki blushed and couldn't help but giggle. "Why thank you, dear. Cute and polite, just like your mother."

Kiyora giggled and also formed a slight blush across her face and took shelter behind her big brother again, this time from embarrassment but she still stared at Miyuki. Tsukasa stared at the situation unfolding before her with mystified eyes and saw Miyuki as a natural with children. An idea suddenly struck Tsukasa and she cleared her throat.

"Hey guys, wouldn't it be fun if Dr. Broden took you on a tour of the hospital and showed you some pretty fun stuff?" Tsukasa asked with her usual excited voice.

"Yeah!" Aito exclaimed happily while throwing his fist into the air and Kiyora's face also showed interest in joining her brother for a tour.

"Would that be okay, Miyuki?" Tsukasa asked.

Miyuki appeared to be almost as excited as Tsukasa's children. "Of course! How about it, kids? Wanna go on a little adventure around the hospital?"

Tsukasa's children hopped from the bed and Aito quickly took Miyuki's hand and couldn't be restrained as Kiyora slowly approached Miyuki's other outstretched hand. With one final glance at her mother, Tsukasa smiled and nodded once back to Kiyora, who looked back to Miyuki, smiled, and took the doctor's hand. Miyuki led the two children out of the room, both of whom were very excited to see the building and happy that they made a new friend.

Tsukasa was grateful for Miyuki for taking her kids and giving her some alone time to talk with her assistant and friend. In Tsukasa's mind, she thanked Miyuki for always being there for them and sat down again next to Yutaka.

"So how are you feeling, Yutaka?" Tsukasa asked.

"I'm doing okay but I'm even better now that you're here." Yutaka said with a sincere smile. "But I've wanted to ask you this since the last time we were on that plane together coming home when my sister first called me about Konata. How are you doing? I mean, with your home life and everything."

Tsukasa sighed. "Well, I did something today I never thought I would have to in my life. I went to see my own mother in jail."

Yutaka quickly looked away. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to bring it up that way, I just—"

"Forget about it, Yutaka. You're one of my best friends and I feel I can tell you anything." Tsukasa quickly replied. "But as upset as I was about that, I was able to convince my mother that everything was going to be okay and that she would soon be free."

"I hope so," Yutaka sighed.

"I know so. I know so because Kagami is persecuting Shido." Tsukasa said with a stern look and confidence in her voice.

Yutaka nodded, knowing all about this ongoing war with Shido but didn't invest too much time in it as she had her own problems with Konata and her health. "Anyway...your kids are amazing."

Tsukasa grinned. "Of course they are; they're mine."

Both Yutaka and Tsukasa were able to share a laugh with each other like old times and it brought a sense of euphoria for both of them. Being able to laugh despite the hardships they were all being forced to endure was one of the things keeping them and their sanity together so they tried their best to keep telling each other stories and making the other laugh.

Yutaka's legs shifted in one of her laughs and the fat envelope stuffed with her letter to Konata fell off her bed and at Tsukasa's feet. She bent down from her chair and picked it up while saying, "What's this?"

Yutaka sighed again and took it from Tsukasa's offering hand. "It's a letter for Konata. Miyuki didn't give us good medical news the other day and one of us is going to have to die to save the other. I volunteered myself and this is...this is for Konata. Just a few things I wanted her to know."

What surprised Yutaka the most was that Tsukasa remained passive. There was clearly hurt in her eyes but Tsukasa continued to sit with quiet dignity and slowly nodded while folding her hands together in her lap. Tsukasa took a deep breath and said, "Is...is that what you really want, Yutaka?"

Yutaka nodded. "Yes...to save Konata."

It was then that Tsukasa's hardened exterior began to buckle and her lips quivered. She bit her lower lip and averted her eyes, trying to fight back the tears as she nodded again. "I...I see. It's...it's going to be...very...hard... for me...when you're...gone."

"I would tell you to be strong for me, but it looks like you're already mastering that." Yutaka observed.

Tsukasa nodded. "I've been getting a lot of that recently. I remember when I first saw Kagami crying in her old room in our house when I got home and she was so broken. She had just visited our mother in jail and she was blaming herself for everything that had happened. One thing about my sis... she's very resilient and strong...but sometimes even she forgets that she is. After I was raped and I became that monster that terrorized my family, she showed me just how strong she was for always sticking by me no matter how hard I tried to push her away. It was her that taught me true strength

and made me want to seek help and strength for myself and not some hollow angry personality. I remember during my second week in White Mountain Psychiatric Hospital, I was once again on the verge of a mental breakdown because I didn't know if I could survive in there. But Kagami visited me one weekend and told me a few things then asked me a question. It made me look at things a little bit differently after that."

Yutaka never saw this side of Tsukasa before and never heard this story. "What did she say?"

"She said that I can feel free to hate anybody and everything I want. I can hate myself, her, our sisters, our parents, the male gender, the world, even God if I wanted." Tsukasa replied. "But the question she asked me was this. 'Has anything I've done with myself up until now made anything better?'"

Yutaka was stunned and remained silent as Tsukasa continued.

"My point is that it was Kagami that made me stronger, but at a slight price to our relationship. When I hit the big-times and I was off on my own, I know how deeply it hurt Kagami because she's the type of person that needs to be needed. She needs to be needed because she gets lonely very easily. I think you already know that yourself with Minami." Tsukasa stated, making Yutaka look away. "I fully support sis in her relationship with your cousin because Kagami will always watch over Konata and protect her and most importantly, she will always love her."

Yutaka nodded and looked back at Tsukasa. "I agree...and that's why I've made this decision to end my life for hers. I just hope it doesn't hurt

everyone too much."

Tsukasa took another deep breath and bluntly released it. "I'm...I'm just thinking about Aito and Kiyora. They love you, too, you know. And they just lost their grandfather."

Yutaka held the letter in her hands. "Looks like I'll have to write a second one..."

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As the hours wore on and the sun once again began to set over Japan, Konata watched the glowing ball of orange fire from her hospital disappear over the horizon and she couldn't help but make parallels in her mind. She wondered if her life force was like that sun as it began to set. It burned brightly all day but as the day stretched onward, the color began to dim like an old kerosene lantern slowly losing its flame until it would disappear. Then there would be infinite darkness. Konata sighed when the sun disappeared behind the city's skyline and she shifted her head back.

She looked at something that made her smile sitting next to her curled and asleep in her usual chair. Kagami continued to stay by Konata's side, just like someone who was truly in love with another person, no matter their condition. Kagami's face was flushed and she still showed signs of perspiration after she was intimate with Konata while she continued to snore lightly and cutely while curled in the padded chair. Konata deepened her trademark cat-like grin as she stared at Kagami and thought.

You naughty little girl...I must've really taken it out of you. I never thought you would be so open in a place like this. But still...I understand why. So much uncertainty.

After their physical expression of love was complete, Konata began writing a letter after Miyuki brought her several pieces of paper and a pen before she and Kagami had sex. So many things Konata wanted to tell her salmon-haired cousin, yet she only had so many pieces of paper to express them on. Ever since Kagami fell asleep about an hour ago, Konata never stopped writing and with the day nearly complete, so was her letter.

Suddenly, Konata's hospital door opened and Yutaka was rolled in on a wheelchair by Minami. Yutaka saw Kagami asleep in the chair and was about to inform Minami to be as quiet as possible but it was too late. Minami swung the heavy wooden door and when it slammed shut, Kagami awoke with a start.

She scrambled to her feet and still dazed and confused, inadvertently exclaimed, "Ah, I'm wet down there!"

All eyes turned to Kagami with confusion, with the exception of Konata who couldn't help but grin again and giggled as Kagami suddenly became aware of her settings. The brightest blush imaginable formed across her face and she sweated profusely while uttering grunts to try and buy more time. Luckily for her Yutaka didn't understand the innuendo while Minami didn't hear it at all.

"Um...what was that, Kagami? Are you feeling okay? You look kind of red." Yutaka observed.

Kagami shook her head quickly, throwing the beads of sweat everywhere. "No, no, no, no! I'm fine...I'm just a little...tired."

Keeping her grin, Konata added, "Yes, she's just tired...from exercising."

"Exercising? What kind of exercise?" Yutaka asked, still perked by confusion and curiosity.

"The horizontal pelvic thrust is her specialty move!" Konata laughed.

"Alright, Konata!" Kagami snapped and immediately turned to Yutaka. "What's going on with you, Yutaka? Are you okay?"

Though still confused, Yutaka still knew she came to her cousin's room for a reason and cleared her throat while turning her attention back to Konata. "I wanted to talk to you about what Miyuki told us. About...one of us...not coming out of surgery."

The situation suddenly shifted from humorous to serious and everyone suddenly forgot Kagami's embarrassing moment as Konata nodded while reaching under her bed sheet. "I agree, and I actually wanted to give this to you."

When Konata's hand resurfaced, she was gripping several pieces of paper with many sentences written on them. She outstretched it to Yutaka, who suddenly puckered her face and began to shake her head.

"Uh-uh, uh-uh, uh-uh, no, no!" Yutaka exclaimed with angry enthusiasm, taking everyone by surprise as the salmon-haired woman continued. "No, I know what that is, Konata! I know...because I wrote you the exact same thing!"

Yutaka reached between her leg and the side of the wheelchair and pulled out a full envelope and outstretched it to Konata, sending the blue-haired woman into a negative retorting spree. Konata refused to take the letter and also became angry.

"I'm not taking it, Yutaka, because you are the one who is going to live!" Konata yelled.

Minami and Kagami exchanged looks of confusion as the situation became more heated. "I don't get it, what are they?" Kagami asked.

"I wrote a letter to Konata that I wanted her to see before we go under for the surgery that explains why I chose to sacrifice myself for her and it talks about all the fond memories we shared plus a few personal things I wanted her to know! I think Konata wrote me the same thing but I won't take it! I'm the one who will die for you, Konata!" Yutaka yelled.

"Shut up, Yutaka!" Konata screamed, adding more drama to the fight. "I'm the oldest and I always swore to Yui that I would look after you and be there for you! I would sacrifice everything for you, even my life! So take my damn letter because you're right, it explains the same thing!"

To Minami's surprise, Yutaka suddenly began to prop herself up to try and stand on her own but she was clearly struggling to push herself up. Minami's nurse's instincts took hold and she rushed over to help Yutaka and to her sudden shock and even horror, Yutaka swatted at her.

"Get back, Minami! Get back!" She yelled, making Minami back off with a perplexed look on her face and continued to watch her petite friend pull herself up until she balanced on her two legs. "You have no right to do this! You have too much to live for! You have a woman of your own to take care of and she needs you here on Earth! I was talking to Tsukasa earlier and she agrees! Kagami needs you here!"

Kagami's ears perked up. "Tsu...Tsukasa was here?"

Her question went unheard as the fight of cousin vs. cousin continued. "And what about Yui?! Your own sister! You think that she's just going to forget about you like you were some bad hair day?! She needs you here too! Take my letter!"

Yutaka's anger boiled over and she quickly swung her open palm around and knocked Konata's handwritten letter out of her grip, sending the many pieces of paper scattering in every direction, only angering Konata and keeping Yutaka heated up. Yutaka's knees shivered and she was clearly

struggling to keep her balance as the two normally cool and level-headed women continued to clash.

"You don't know how lucky you are, Konata! You have someone to share your heart with! Nobody ever fell in love with me! I never knew the joys of being in a relationship and being there for someone when they needed me! You're being so heartless and selfish to Kagami for wanting to do this! I'm the one who will die!" Yutaka screamed and began to pant.

Silence fell between the two cousins as they stared at each other with frowns and gritting teeth. Suddenly, something happened to them. Simultaneously, their anger disappeared and to Minami's and Kagami's surprise, they slowly formed smiles. What came next was even more surprising. They both started laughing. It started as simple giggles but eventually it evolved to full-blown laughs and Yutaka even began to form tears in her eyes as she held her stomach.

"Why...why are we fighting about this, Konata? Don't we realize what we're fighting over?" Yutaka laughed.

Konata finished her laugh and took a deep breath. "I know, right? It's so stupid! We're fighting over who wants to die...! But I think we should be proud of ourselves."

Wiping a tear away, Yutaka looked back at her cousin. "Why's that, Konata?"

"Because it just shows how much we love each other and how loyal we are. There are plenty of other people out there who would be doing the exact opposite and trying to get the other to die to save themselves. But us...we love each other so much that both of us would instantly throw away our lives to save the other. I think we should be proud." Konata said and sat up in her bed and opened her arms.

Yutaka saw the gesture, smiled, and approached. She hugged her cousin deeply while whispering, "I love you, Konata."

"I love you too, Yutaka. I think that when the time comes...we'll let fate decide for us. It's obvious we're incapable of making such a horrid decision against each other." Konata said.

Yutaka pulled away and grinned with a nod.

As peace seemed to be restored, a disturbing beeping began sounding erupted from the medical equipment attached to Konata. The blue-haired woman suddenly latched onto her heart and began groaning in pain as she fell backwards on her bed.

"Konata! Konata what's wrong?!" Yutaka exclaimed as Minami rushed over to the digital monitors to see what was happening.

"My heart...it's on fire...!" Konata squealed in pain as Kagami quickly took her lover's hand and held it tight.

"Minami, what's happening?!" Kagami cried.

"I don't know but it seems her heart is slowing at an alarming rate." Minami stated and quickly ran and opened the hospital room door. "I need help in here!"

CHAPTER 20

"Are you feeling better, Konata?" Kagami whispered as her sweaty palms sandwiched Konata's bandaged left hand. The twin-tailed woman's eyes continued to shift back and forth from Konata's frozen look of terror cast upward and the ten electrodes attached to her petite body monitoring her heart rate. Konata continued to lay flat on a gurney in her hospital room and Miyuki stood nearby monitoring the results and searching for any signs of trouble. It was an antagonizing night last night but as noon rolled in the next day, Konata was still with them and keeping hope alive.

Staring upward, Konata showed a look of pure fear as she uttered, "Kagami...I'm so scared."

The only thing keeping Kagami together was Konata's earlier words telling her to be strong and it was that that held her up. Any other time before then, hearing those words would've gutted Kagami to pieces and she would've had a meltdown. Knowing that Konata needed her to be strong gave her a surge of adrenaline and she continued to stay tough for the love of her life. Kagami began to gently rub Konata's bandaged hand.

"It's okay. Miyuki said you just had a mild heart arrhythmia and that it wasn't the problem we thought it would be." Kagami assured. "Just stay still and let the drugs the doctors gave you take hold. We're going to get through this, Konata. You and me, together...forever."

Konata didn't reply and continued to stare at the ceiling and was afraid to move. The heart arrhythmia made her ultrasensitive to every movement in her body and she could feel everything happen inside of her. She could feel her heart beat, she could feel the blood rushing throughout her body, she could feel the food she was digesting move through her intestines, and she could feel her brain pulsate in her head. Feeling her body's every single function frightened her so that she dared not turn her head to look at Kagami even though she wanted to so badly. She feared the slightest movement could trigger something new and worse. Even though she could feel Kagami latching on to her, she still felt all alone.

The EKG machine attached to Konata printed the results for Miyuki and she quickly snatched them. Holding them up with one hand and adjusting her glasses to better her vision, she began to analyze every blip and line drawn on the paper by the machine. Kagami watched anxiously while Konata shifted her eyes over to the silent Miyuki as she continued to read the results.

Giving a curious hum, Miyuki lowered the results and Kagami cleared her throat. "So what's the verdict, Miyuki?" Kagami asked.

"Kagami-san, may I speak to you outside for a moment, please?" Miyuki asked and gently folded the results and put them away.

This couldn't have been good news. Or could it? Neither Kagami nor Konata could tell because of the tone of Miyuki's voice. She didn't sound worried or upset about the results; she just sounded her typical majestic self, giving reassurance to the ailing couple. Kagami whispered that she would be right back, to which Konata replied to with a slight nod. Letting go of the bandaged hand, Kagami followed Miyuki out of the hospital bedroom and the pink-haired nurse closed the door behind her.

"Okay so tell me the good news, Miyuki. It didn't look like you were too upset or anything so—" Kagami began.

"Anytime now." Miyuki stated as her eyes filled with water.

"Wh...what?"

"I don't know when...but Konata-san could die at any second now." Miyuki choked and inadvertently moved her hand to her stomach where a new life was beginning to form inside of her. "The disease has finally found her heart and it could stop it at anytime and when that happens, we won't be able to start it again."

The news was so devastating, Kagami felt a sudden shock of trillions of emotions. It hit her so hard and so fast it was like déjà vu when she found Konata curled in the shower after Shido's vicious assault. She once again found herself in a spot where she didn't know what to do. Even though Konata's health was out of her control, she still felt that she had failed at

protecting her again and now the clock was about to strike midnight for the woman Kagami loved.

"Wh...what do...what do we...do?" Kagami simply asked in a voice coming from a broken soul.

Miyuki shook her head. "It's not about what we can do...it's about what Yutaka-san can do. For whatever reason, this disease is killing Konata-san faster and we are out of time, Kagami-san. I'm so sorry...but a choice must be made."

Kagami glanced away. "But Yutaka..."

Miyuki let a tear escape her eye. "I know, I know. This is going to tear Konata-san apart when this is all over but we all know how Yutaka-san feels about this. I just can't even begin to imagine what their families are going to go through after this. A family losing their baby..."

It was then that Kagami saw the involuntary hand movements Miyuki was making across her stomach. Because Kagami was as smart as she was, she was easily able to put two and two together. "Mi...Miyuki...you're...you're..."

Miyuki blushed and looked away. "I am...and I already feel horrible and I now truly feel their pain. Every time I look at them now...all I can think of is the child growing inside me. It could easily be any of them. And now... I...I...I don't think I can do this anymore."

Seeing Miyuki start to cry and cover her face with both hands triggered Kagami to reel her in close and hold her tight. It was an emotional scene for the both of them and with Miyuki not looking, Kagami felt her eyes tighten and the water was released from them while Miyuki continued to sob into her shoulder. As Kagami rubbed her back, something unexpected broke the bond between them.

"Kagami..." A familiar voice said.

Kagami turned her head and gasped loudly upon seeing who stood before them as she backed out of her hug with Miyuki. When the pink-haired doctor turned and saw who Kagami was gawking at, she too gasped and quickly covered her mouth with her hands. Miyuki never expected to see this person ever again and neither did Kagami but she had a feeling that she would at some point hear from her again.

Before them stood Patricia Martin. The golden-haired woman clutched a manila envelope with her hands visibly trembling in its grip and she slowly stepped forward. Kagami was curious as to why she was at the hospital, but also curious as to why she had such a look of fear and submissiveness on her face. Patty struggled to make eye contact with her and held the large envelope in front of her as if it was a shield and she was going into a life and death battle. Kagami however feared that the contents of the envelope may lead to exactly that.

"Do you want me to call security?" Miyuki whispered into Kagami's ear.

Kagami shook her head. "No it's okay, I got this."

Miyuki removed herself from the situation and allowed Kagami to take charge. Kagami approached the trembling Patty and stood in front of her, rearing her tsundere exterior. She didn't know what was about to happen but history and instinct was telling her to expect the unexpected.

"What are you doing here, Patty?" Kagami asked in a stern but still inviting voice. She couldn't read Patty's mind and had to assume she was still a threat until further determination said otherwise so she didn't want to completely blow the foreign girl off.

After several failed attempts at initiating a conversation, Patty was finally able to take a deep breath and say, "Is there a place we can talk in private, please?"

Though she was still on guard and reserved, Kagami had to admit that curiosity was once again taking hold of her and she led Patty to one of the waiting rooms. Though they weren't completely alone, Kagami wanted it that way as she still didn't know exactly what she was getting herself into. As they sat in front of the other, Patty was able to observe something.

"I couldn't help but notice that you knew exactly where to go when you brought me to this waiting room. You've been here many times already, haven't you?" Patty asked.

Kagami nodded. "Regrettably so. After Konata and I slept together for the first time, I found her in her bathroom unconscious and covered in blood and vomit. Ever since then, this building has practically been my second home."

Patty looked away. "I'm guessing you want to know why I'm here, then."

"Very much so. You were one of the last people I ever expected to come see me here." Kagami said sternly as she crossed one leg over the other.

To Kagami's surprise, Patty gulped and she slowly looked back at Kagami. To the twin-tailed woman's further surprise, she was able to look into Patty's eyes and she suddenly saw something she never expected to see. Guilt. Something was eating away at Patty's conscience and Kagami suddenly felt that this conversation was about to become very interesting.

"I...I just wanted to tell you that...I've been thinking a lot about what you said. About...letting go of the past." Patty said submissively as she held the envelope tight. "And I also wanted to say that I'm so, so, so...sorry, Kagami."

Kagami tilted her head. "If this is about Tsukasa and the shrine incident then we've already forgotten about it so—"

"No, it's not that. I...I just wanted to express my deepest regret for... murdering your father." Patty said and her face suddenly swelled.

Narrowing her eyes to a glare, Kagami's fists clenched instinctively. "What the hell are you talking about, Patty?"

Patty swallowed another gulp. "When I first teamed up with Shido, he promised me that he would destroy everything you loved. I thought it was always metaphorical and nothing else. I didn't see anything wrong or suspicious when he called me and asked me for a list of potent chemicals that worked well on cleaning mold from hot tubs and things like that, so I gave him the names of the cleaners. Shido took them and mixed them together in a certain formula, turning it into a very toxic poison to humans and that's what he slipped your father. An autopsy was performed on your father, right?"

Kagami nodded as she felt the rage boiling but still continued to listen.

"The chemicals he used could be found in any home in Japan or even across the world. The police suspected your mother instantly because they assumed she would know about these kinds of things because she was a housewife." Patty replied with growing guilt in her voice. "I swear to you I didn't know he was going to do that to you, Kagami. If I did I would've stopped him and reported him to the police! I'm sorry, I'm so sorry...!"

Kagami was ready to butcher Patty on the spot, but it was seeing the golden-haired girl collapse and begin to cry relentlessly that stopped her. She could tell right away that Patty was speaking the truth and was used by an evil monster to murder an innocent man. Her emotions were pure and this wasn't an act to garner further gullibility from the twin-tailed woman.

Taking a deep breath, Kagami took her own advice and let it go and instead of killing Patty, she continued to dig.

"Patty...look at me." Kagami requested.

Patty was able to stop crying momentarily and looked at Kagami through her tear-drenched eyes.

"If what you're saying is true...can you prove any of this?" Kagami asked with a very serious tone in her voice.

Sniffing once, Patty lifted her envelope. "I already have."

Kagami's eyes shot open as she watched Patty open the envelope and retracted a single piece of paper. With trembling hands, Patty slowly outstretched the document and Kagami took it and held it to her eyes. As she read the paper, she suddenly realized what she was reading and her breathing deepened. Her palms began to sweat and she could feel her heart pound in her chest as she stared at the evidence that was about to change her life.

"Patty...this is...this is..." Kagami stuttered with her eyes fixated on the paper.

"Just think of that as my way of making it up to you and your family, Kagami. I'm not expecting forgiveness...just maybe some hope of redemption." Patty sniffed again.

"How did you get this?!" Kagami hissed loudly.

"I went to your law firm this morning and spoke to Ayano. It took me some time to convince her I wasn't looking for a fight but when I was able to, she told me Shido was in a meeting. She let me into his office and I hacked his computer and was able to print that for you. Just show that to the police and you'll have him." Patty informed.

What came next blew Patty's mind. Kagami lunged forward and the foreign woman was expecting her to get whipped by the second Hiiragi twin, but it was quite the opposite. Kagami gently wrapped her arms around Patty and pulled her close into a hug. The irony was amazing. Patty was beaten to a pulp by the sweetest and most docile Hiiragi twin, but she was hugged and comforted by the hardened tsundere Hiiragi twin.

Kagami pulled away and was crying as she spoke again. "Patty...what you have just done for me is the bravest and greatest thing anyone has ever done for me or my family. Please...please visit us at our home in Saitama anytime. You're part of our family now."

Hearing these words touched Patty deeply and she quickly wiped another tear away. Not knowing exactly how to respond to the sudden influx of kindness, Patty held her envelope up again and showed Kagami there was one more thing in it. She turned the envelope upside-down and dumped it

out and to Kagami's surprise, a wad of 500,000 yen dropped out in front of her, making Kagami look around to make sure no one was watching them.

"Patty...what's this?" She asked in shock.

"Shido paid me this to take that picture of you and Konata at that café. He stole it from your firm and...well...I wanted to give it back." Patty said with more guilt in her voice.

Kagami slowly picked up the bundle of money and held it in her hands. It didn't take her long to suddenly take Patty's hand and place the wad back into her possession, taking her by surprise. Kagami cupped Patty's hand holding the money with hers and cleared her throat. "You take, it Patty."

"Kagami?"

"I want you to have this money. I know the kind of lifestyle you've been forced to live since you got out of jail and I know it's unbearably hard. Please take it as a token of my gratitude and I know you need it more than I do. And please don't lose contact with me or my friends or family anymore." Kagami proclaimed in a display of teaming and sincere emotions. "From now on whenever you need anything...anything at all... please come to me. My family and I will take care of you."

Patty's eyes watered again. "...Kagami..." was all Patty could whimper as she hugged the twin-tailed woman again, who happily pulled her tighter while Kagami had only one thought.

Koichi Shido...prepare to burn.

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As the situation took a unique turn for Kagami outside, Konata continued to breathe lightly alone in her room. Miyuki returned to her side to take the EKG machine away and tried her best to both keep a close eye on the slightest change in Konata's health while at the same time remaining casual about it. The pink-haired nurse feared that at any second, the blue-haired woman's heart would stop and then it would either be game over for Konata Izumi, or for Yutaka Kobayakawa.

"Mi...Miyuki...where's Kagami?" Konata asked in a helpless and defenseless voice, like a child looking for her mother.

Miyuki was still oblivious to Kagami's attempts at trying to help Patricia Martin but assumed she had it under control as she always had in the past. However, Miyuki was aware of Patty's past sins and didn't want to put any stress on Konata so she formulated a story. She cleared her throat and said, "A friend of hers came to visit. That's all."

"Oh...I see..." Konata panted lightly.

"Is there anything I can get for you, Konata-san?" Miyuki asked and still felt hurt about seeing her blue-haired friend lay before her in such a decrepit

condition.

Konata nodded lightly. "I...I want to speak to...Yutaka..."

Miyuki complied and left the hospital room to fetch Konata's cousin. As she rested alone, Konata continued to think about something else that was deeply troubling her. She remembered when she saw her very first doctor when this hell began, Dr. Honda. However, that's not what disturbed her. What disturbed her was the dream she had the previous night about sitting with her mother under a peaceful tree on a summer's day while watching the countless beautiful flowers dance in the breeze while the mother and daughter wore the same white, glowing dress. The worst part was Konata continued to have that dream every single night ever since.

Konata heard a commotion and was able to look up for the first time and saw Minami push Yutaka into her room on her wheelchair again. Yutaka was still too weak to walk on her own as Minami put the brake on the chair and the salmon-haired woman said she was okay and to give them some time alone. Minami complied and said she would be right outside if they needed her or Miyuki.

"Are you okay, Konata?" Yutaka asked with concern when they were finally alone.

To Yutaka's horror, Konata shook her head no. "I can feel it. I'm not going to make it, Yutaka."

She wanted to fight her cousin and tell her to stop talking like that but she knew what it was only going to lead to. Feeling hollow and defeated, all Yutaka could whisper was her cousin's name.

"I've been having this dream...about my mother every night since this all began. I was even having it before I became sick." Konata said with no emotion in her voice. "I've been seeing my mother and I was in her embrace under this tree on this beautiful summer day. As I think...I can't help but feel that it was a warning to me. I have a feeling that within the next few hours...I'm going to be meeting my mother."

Yutaka gulped and it was becoming too real for her. Her chest tightened slightly and she rubbed herself slightly until she was able to talk again. "Konata...I don't know what else to say. Why is this happening to us?"

Konata shook her head. "I wish I knew, Yutaka. It's so unfair. But there are a few things I want you to know. Since you didn't read my letter...I wanted to tell you."

Yutaka shifted her eyes away and was afraid of what her cousin was about to reveal. Regardless, she knew that she was unable to wave a magic wand and cure her cousin so she figured she could at least give her this. She allowed Konata to continue.

"I just wanted you to know that when I was growing up and when Yui would come over to my home every day when you were still a baby, my family wasn't at their best. My father suffered from alcoholism when my mother died but you and Yui were there to pick us up and carry us forward."

Konata divulged. "I don't know if you remember, but you were my very first friend and as the years went on...you became so much more than that. You were the sister I never had."

Yutaka felt her eyes flood as Konata continued.

"I wanted to be there to protect you and it took so much out of me to see you so sick and frail all the time when we were growing up." She added. "I know I always looked and acted energetically...but that was all for you. Without you...I would've been so lonely and broken. When I met Kagami for the first time, I fell in love with her instantly but I couldn't tell her. Instead, I did what I always did and either made fun of her or gave her a hard time by playfully flirting with her to see how she would react. That was how I dealt with my closet feelings...but little did I know that she dealt with her closet feelings for me by getting angry and temperamental."

"I know all of that, Konata. Tsukasa told me all about it and we both had a feeling you and Kagami were in love with each other even before you two finally confessed it." Yutaka replied. "Forgive me...but what exactly are you trying to say?"

Konata took a deep breath. "When I tried to be there for you...you were always there for me instead. I never saw it until all of this began happening. So many times I wanted to tell Kagami the truth in high school but I just couldn't. When you came and lived with my dad and I, it helped build me up and your very presence helped me through some tough times. You being with me reminded me of some more innocent times when things weren't so horrible. Even now with you by my side, I still feel good about everything. I just...wanted to thank you for that, Yutaka. Thanks for the memories."

Yutaka sniffled as a tear fell to her lap. "Konata...I...I..."

Hearing her younger cousin's breathing patterns change suddenly, Konata moved her head over to Yutaka and her heart once again went into overdrive. Yutaka was struggling to sit up properly and was clutching her heart as she breathed deeply though sporadically and her eyes showed true terror within them. It all happened so fast. Before Konata could yell for assistance, Yutaka's small body went limp and she fell out of her chair to the tile floor with a violent crash.

"I need help!" Konata cried as she struggled to pull herself up and Minami quickly swung the door open and saw Yutaka's limp body on the floor, her hand still gripping her robe covering her heart.

"Crash cart!" Minami yelled into the hallway and Miyuki quickly joined them as another nurse rolled a defibrillator into the room. Miyuki took the two powerful electrodes while Minami turned Yutaka on her back and ripped open her robe, exposing her bare body as the pink-haired doctor sat on her knees and placed the electrodes on Yutaka.

"Charging...clear!" Miyuki yelled and sent powerful shockwaves into Yutaka, making her body jump up.

Minami took her stethoscope to Yutaka's chest and quickly pulled back while shaking her head and showed rising panic.

"Going in again! Charging...clear!" Miyuki yelled again and jolted the salmon-haired woman again as her cousin could only watch helplessly.

The green-haired nurse once again moved in with her stethoscope and breathed deeply while saying, "We have a heartbeat."

Miyuki breathed a sigh of relief as Konata covered her face and cried. Miyuki stood and ordered, "Get her back to her room and prep her and her cousin for surgery!"

While the nurses complied, Konata looked up with her crying face. "Surgery?"

Miyuki placed both her hands on Konata's shoulders. "I'm sorry Konata-san, but you're both out of time. We need to operate now or we'll lose both of you."

Konata sniffed. "Then take my lungs. Save Yutaka!"

Miyuki took a deep breath and tightened her grip on Konata's shoulders, as if this was the last chance she would be able to hold her. "Is there anything you want me to tell Kagami-san?"

With one final teardrop, Konata nodded. "Tell her the truth. Tell her...I love her."

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Though the place she was returning to was still dank and grotesque, Patricia Martin felt that a new ray of light was shining down upon her as she walked back to her apartment. She was not only given redemption for what she did, but also forgiveness from Kagami. The tides had shifted dramatically and Patty reveled in the fact that Kagami was working as she walked to take down Shido once and for all. All the incriminating evidence Kagami ever needed or wanted was on one single piece of paper, now in her possession and soon to be in police possession.

As the sun was beginning to set on this day, she felt that the next was going to bring more opportunity. She now felt accepted and part of the Hiiragi family despite what she did to them all those years ago and she gained a new sense of awe and admiration for them. To forgive what she did and be welcomed into the family with open arms gave her something not even her own family in America did. But that just showed her what kind of a person Kagami truly was on the inside; the epiphany of everything that was good and righteous. Kagami was able to prove her own point to Patty that not only could anyone from any country hurt her, but also anyone from any country could also help her.

Smiling to herself, Patty walked through the empty parking lot towards her ramshackle apartment until she approached a large dumpster. As she passed it, her screams of terror where muffled by a hand covering her mouth and to her horror, she was lifted off the ground. A man much larger than her carried her towards the apartment building as she struggled and tried to free herself. She saw she was being led to a back alley near the building and feared she was about to be violated.

When she was dragged into the dark alley, she heard a voice whisper to her that froze her body and soul. "I was hoping I could talk to you for a minute."

Koichi Shido.

Patty shifted her eyes to her right and saw his face staring at her and she could feel her heart pound in her chest. She gulped again and stopped resisting for fear of him hurting her to make her stop. When he saw that she stopped thrashing, Shido let her stand on her own but still held onto her shirt.

"I was hoping you could explain to me why I got off the phone with an associate and he told me that there's a warrant out for my arrest." Shido hissed with narrowing eyes.

Patty grinned, making his grip tighten on her shirt. "Good...that means Kagami is a woman of action...and I'm square with her now. That Kagami...she's an incredible woman. I just regret treating her and her family the way I did."

"Kagami...?" He asked. "So it was you that hacked my office computer. I should've known. And it was you that gave that specific document to her, I assume."

"You assume correctly, you monster." Patty smiled with bravery. "You better give your heart to the gods because your ass is about to become property of Kagami Hiiragi."

To Patty's surprise, Shido smiled as he wrapped his hand around the back of Patty's neck and held her. "Clever little girl...just like Kagami. It's just too bad you won't be there for the trial."

Before Patty could scream, Shido tightened his grip around the back of Patty's neck and placed his other hand over her mouth as she tried to free herself again. Shido's tight grip though was no match for her as he prepared to execute another maneuver.

"I was planning on doing this Tsukasa's little girl while her son watched and begged me not to, so you have the privilege of being the guinea pig." Shido whispered as Patty continued to desperately try and free herself. "Ah...life. So precious...so mysterious...and yet...so fragile."

With a violent and sudden thrust, Shido twisted Patty's neck to the right and a heartbreaking snap echoed in the alley and Patty's body went limp. She stopped struggling and every bit of life in the golden-haired woman was gone. Still holding the limp body, Shido dropped her and Patty's dead corpse collapsed onto the rotten cement with a thud. A horrific silence engulfed them as Shido stood tall above the deceased Patricia Martin and slowly turned.

"Well, well, well, Kagami. You finally have what you want and it doesn't look good for me." He said in a suspiciously calm voice. "However, if you

think that'll stop me from taking your niece, nephews, and sisters away from you...you are dead wrong...just like they'll be. But first...one more stop along the way."

A/N: The final four chapters have arrived so if anyone read Loss of Innocence you know the climax is next. Also, check out the new poll on my profile regarding this story! Don't worry, the ending is already figured out so I just wanted to see everyone's perspective. Anyway, hold on tight and as always, thanks for reading!

CHAPTER 21

Though she was sitting comfortably in the hospital, Kagami Hiiragi felt that she had just completed a triathlon. With her heart pounding and her breathing deep, she continued to think of the events that had transpired within the past few hours as the time neared eight o'clock at night. After she welcomed Patricia Martin into her life, she immediately turned that one credible piece of evidence over to Yui Narumi, who despite not being a cop anymore, immediately relayed it to the police. An arrest warrant was issued for Koichi Shido on the spot and now every police car in Tokyo was looking for him. Despite the fact that the monster who had murdered her father was on the run, she wasn't taking refuge in that fact. She was scared. When she returned to the hospital, anyone could imagine her horror when she was informed that Konata and Yutaka were now in the operating room. She didn't even get a chance to give Konata one final kiss.

Alone Kagami sat in the waiting room and she prayed. She prayed for Konata, the love of her life. She prayed for Yutaka, the cousin of the love of her life. She prayed for Miyuki to make the right decision, though a clear definition of the right decision had been blurry for a long time now. Kagami

held her cell phone in her hand and saw the screen blinking, showing she had a new text message. It came to her about an hour ago and she didn't know to open her phone or not. She knew that if Shido was captured, she would be called and not texted.

Regardless, after rolling around the idea of looking at her message in her head for nearly an hour, Kagami slowly opened her phone and saw the message was from Ayano Minegishi.

Please call me when you can.

The simple request by her former secretary proved to be a herculean one. In Kagami's mind, she didn't know what fresh batch of hell was about to be plopped onto her lap but knew that whatever it was, it couldn't have been as important as Konata and Yutaka. She did however have a feeling that it had something to do with Patty.

As she sat and thought about everything that has been going on, Kagami's train of thought was broken by a new voice that said, "Mind if I join you?"

The twin-tailed woman looked up and for some odd reason, she felt waves of relief when she saw Hiyori Tamura standing before her with two cups of coffee in each hand. Kagami smiled and invited Hiyori to sit with her and the long-haired otaku and friend of Konata sat next to her. She gave one of the cups to Kagami, who instantly took it and swallowed a gulp.

"Cream and sugar...just the way I like it. Thank you." Kagami said with a smile.

Hiyori nodded. "You're welcome. I know you enjoyed them like that when you were in school and I didn't think that would be something about you that would change. Konata once told me that despite your tsundere exterior, you're still a little girl at heart."

Normally Kagami would've been annoyed by that comment and retort with a verbal attack about either Konata or Hiyori. This time however, Kagami couldn't help but sigh and show her feminine side by reflecting on the woman she called her own. "She's right. Even though I accomplished so much in my life, at times I still feel like a little girl lost in this world and who only wants the simple things in her life. I want coffee with so much cream and sugar, it borders on hot chocolate. I want to sleep-in on Saturdays and wear my pajamas all day while eating ice cream for breakfast. I also sometimes think about going out and buying myself another game console or having slumber parties again. But I always held myself to higher and more mature standards...but I still don't know why. My only explanation is that I was a highly competitive child, especially in school. But I also think that's why Konata is the perfect match for me. We're the yin-yang so to speak. I remain serious, mature, and professional, while she is always there to remind me of a time in my life that doesn't so closely resemble the hell it is now."

Hiyori simply sat and listened. It was rare for Kagami to open up regarding these feelings but when she did, it was like watching an eclipse. One couldn't simply turn away because of how incredible and exceptional the sight was.

"I know Miyuki has a job to do...but if Konata dies...I'll die along with her. No one else understood me and I believe that Konata was the one person I could truly open up to about what it was like to be different. We may not have shared all the same interests...but at least she understood." Kagami finished.

Hiyori looked away. "I understand, too. I know what it's like to be different. I should also count myself lucky because I was able to find love and I'm married now. You two found love in each other, right?"

Kagami nodded.

"Then your bonds will never truly be severed no matter how this ends for you." Hiyori said and took a sip of her coffee.

Silence fell between them until it became too awkward and Kagami cleared her throat and spoke again. "Why are you here, Hiyori? Is it for Konata?"

"And you."

Kagami smiled lightly. "Thank you."

"You're welcome...but if Konata lives through this, something is telling me that she's going to wish she hadn't." Hiyori said and swallowed another gulp of the hot beverage.

Hearing this unusual statement given the circumstances prompted Kagami to turn her head and look at Hiyori. "Why would you say something like that?"

Inhaling and exhaling deeply and with a look of hurt on her face, Hiyori was forced to come clean about something. "I got another call from Konata and I's manga publisher today and they told us we're fired."

Kagami's heart skipped a beat and she lifted her head higher while expressing a look of concern. "They...they fired you...? But why...? Is it because Konata is sick?"

Hiyori shook her head. "That's what I thought it was at first, but it turns out the owners of the publisher decided to let us go because Konata is a lesbian."

Forming a glare, Kagami became angry and retorted with a mad voice. "They fired her because of our relationship?! Isn't that illegal?!"

Hiyori nodded. "That's what I asked but they replied saying they hired a new lawyer last week that promised to defend them against any discrimination suit we could bring up. It turns out he has it in for Konata for whatever reason. He's some big corporate lawyer named Shido. Have you heard of him?"

Kagami once again found herself on the receiving end of so many emotions, this time most of them were angry and hostile. Once again, Shido showed his cunning side and his plans at his endless persecution of not only Kagami, but everyone she loved. Either way, she knew Shido's time was short and looked away.

"Yeah, I heard of him." Kagami replied.

Before Hiyori could reply, the ringtone of Kagami's cell phone sounded and the twin-tailed woman looked at her screen. She saw it was Yui's cell phone and she excused herself from the conversation and walked to a secluded part of the waiting room to find privacy. She answered her phone and took a deep breath, thinking this nightmare for her was finally over with the capture of Koichi Shido.

"Did you get him?" Kagami asked as her opening line.

"I'm afraid not and I have some bad news for you, Kagami." Yui replied.
"I'm with my old unit at Patricia Martin's apartment after a bystander came across a body in an alley near the building and called us. It's her. Her neck was broken and we think it was Shido that did it."

Nearly losing grip of her phone, Kagami tried desperately to also keep her emotional outburst bottled inside of her as she turned and saw Hiyori was sitting with her back still turned to her. "Oh my god..."

"Listen, Kagami, we've increased our resources to try and find this bastard but we still don't know where he is and he murdered this woman. I'm calling you to tell your family to stay inside, lock their doors, and don't answer the door for anybody under any circumstance unless it's one of us." Yui informed. "It makes sense to us that he'll target your sisters and their children next."

Kagami used her sharp intuition and rolled around every possible scenario. Yui was right when she said that Shido would do everything in his limited time to take everything else from her, but something suddenly struck her. There was still one last thing and one last person he could take from Kagami before he moved on to her family. She instantly knew this person was in danger and only had time to say one thing.

"He won't hurt my family first." She said.

The phone finally fell from her grip and as it smacked on the floor, Kagami began running with all her might through the waiting room. It caught the attention of Hiyori and she called her name but the twin-tailed woman ignored it and dashed out of the hospital. All the while, Yui's voice continued to call Kagami's name over the phone as the electronic device rested on the hospital floor.

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It was dark and the rest of the workers had already gone home for the night, except for one lonely secretary. Ayano Minegishi was working yet another late night with unpaid overtime but the only thing that kept her going was

the fact that this was going to be the last time she would have to do it. With the rest of the office floor dark, her desk lamp cast the only light on the floor as she filled out more paperwork for Shido.

Taking a break from the endless work, Ayano sat back in her chair and sighed with deep remorse while rubbing her eyes. She longed to break out of this prison she was trapped in but suddenly remembered the interesting turn of events for her that unfolded this morning. Anyone could've imagined her surprise when Patricia Martin came to the firm to see her and that she wanted to redeem herself by helping Kagami. Though she was skeptical at first, Ayano allowed Patty into Shido's office when she expressed her deepest regrets at what she did in the past.

Now Ayano sat alone and hoped that Patty was able to use that weapon against Shido; the document she was able to print off. Patty was able to find a single manuscript in the computer that showed the step-by-step instructions on how to mix the chemicals properly and the kitchen routines of Miki Hiiragi. Patty knew there were other incriminating documents in his computer but decided to let the police take care of that when the time came.

It was also Patty's deep expression of guilt that hit Ayano where it hurt the most for she was truly able to understand the tragedy and the consequences one stupid mistake could bring. While she sat alone, she looked around instinctively to make sure she was alone as her usual habit dictated. When the coast was still clear, Ayano reached into a drawer at her desk and pulled out a small picture frame with an old image in it. Every time she looked at the picture, she felt a mixture of both happiness and sadness. This time she felt mostly sadness.

The image was of her and her former best friend, Misao Kusakabe, together at their high school graduation. They were both dressed in their graduation gowns with Ayano simply standing and smiling for the picture while Misao had her arm bluntly wrapped around her neck and giving the peace sign with her other hand while smiling brightly. How did it go so wrong for her as well? Ayano remembered when she was dating Misao's older brother and the two were a perfect match. Some even speculated that a marriage proposal was imminent for her but it all changed one horrible night when a devastating mistake was made by her. Ayano and her boyfriend broke up shortly after and Misao angrily proclaimed she never wanted to see Ayano again. Fifteen years had passed since that night and the two former friends hadn't talked since. Reminiscing about it brought a single tear to Ayano's eye as she looked at the picture.

"...I'm sorry..." she inadvertently muttered with guilt while looking at Misao's smile.

Suddenly, the haunting peace was broken by the ding of the elevator's bells telling someone had arrived at the floor. Ayano looked at her watch and upon seeing how late it was, she assumed it was Toshi, the night janitor coming to make his rounds for the evening. She casually put the old picture back in her desk drawer as she heard a man clamor about in the darkness with a heavy tow of supplies with him.

"Good evening, Toshi. I'll be out of your way in a minute. The jackass has me working overtime again and isn't paying me so give me a minute." She snapped upon mentioning Shido and began to clean up the mountains of papers around her. As she cleaned, she didn't notice the janitor didn't respond as he moved his way through the cubicles on the floor with her and moved closer to her.

His voice suddenly spoke when it reached Ayano's turned back. "Well that jackass just might make you stay later, now."

Ayano jumped and shrieked as the voice instantly registered in her mind as belonging to Koichi Shido. She turned and saw the devil dressed in black standing before her, his black jacket stained with a few drops of fresh blood. The look on his face was that of an animal as he looked down at the frightened and trembling woman.

"Sh...Shido...I...I..." Ayano stuttered in fear as she raised her fist to her face to act as both a defensive and offensive tool. "Where's Toshi?"

Shido grinned, scaring her further. "I asked him to do a simple favor for me; disable the sprinkler system in this building. When he refused, I held him down and cut off one of his fingers. Then he complied and when he did, I cut his throat."

"W...Why...?"

"I just wanted to make sure we're not disturbed for our final moment together," he sneered as he outstretched his hand and gently rubbed Ayano's face, making her feel more scared.

Suddenly, he grabbed her by her long hair, yanked her around as she cried in pain and for assistance and found herself being bent over her desk while Shido held her down. Her back end was sticking out towards him and her heart pounded as she feared what was about to come next.

With Shido's grip still on her scalp, she pleaded, "Please...don't rape me..."

"Rape you? Don't flatter yourself, Ayano. Your cheating snatch isn't worthy of my manhood." He chuckled as he held her down with an evil smile. "I know it was you that let Patty in my office and hack my computer. Who else had that ability? Now, you must be punished like her."

Before she knew what happened, Shido tightened his grip on Ayano's hair, hoisted her head up, and with every muscle in his arm and upper body, slammed her head on the desk, nearly knocking her unconscious. Her body collapsed to the floor and though she was still awake, everything suddenly felt surreal as her head pounded in pain. She wasn't able to comprehend the fact that Shido was dragging her body across the floor until he eventually sat her up in a chair and she soon couldn't move. After that, her vision continued to come and go as she saw the devil in black walk about the firm building's top floor back and forth.

It continued like this for several more minutes until her concussion faded and she was able to see clearly again. When her vision returned, she looked around herself and saw that she was tied to her office chair with her arms behind her back and bounded with rope. She also realized she couldn't talk or breathe out of her mouth and was able to feel the adhesive power of a large piece of duct tape covering her mouth. It only got worse when she looked up and saw Shido finish his final chore. She saw him dump the final amount of gasoline from a red gas can all over a cubicle and he threw the empty can across the room. Now his evil intentions were clear. He was going to burn down Kagami's law firm at the top floor so the whole building would eventually collapse with her in it and that's why he wanted the sprinkler system to be disabled.

Shido walked over to her, his evil grin still plastered on his face and Ayano's heart began to increase its thumping when he reached into his pocket and pulled out a silver Zippo lighter. He stood before her as she looked up with a bleeding gash on her head and countless tears flowing down her face as she shook her head and the duct tape muffled her pleas for him to spare her life.

"Don't worry, I'm not completely heartless. I won't let you die alone." He said and walked over to Ayano's desk and opened one of the drawers and grabbed what he was looking for. He walked back to her and he held the same picture frame of Ayano and Misao together in their high school graduation gowns. Unfolding the back leg of the small picture frame, Shido placed it on the desk next to Ayano so she could see it and stare at it. "You can spend the remaining time you have left on Earth apologizing to poor little Kusakabe. To think, her brother trusted you with his heart and you betrayed him by getting drunk at a party and having sex with his best friend. All cheating bitches burn in hell, Ayano. And just as I was beginning to warm up to you, too." He finished and ignited the lighter as Ayano continued to scream and thrash in her chair.

Shido turned and hurled the lighter with all his might across the room and when it landed, a wall of bright flames exploded on the other side of the room and began to engulf everything it touched. The heat of the flames was felt instantly as Shido patted Ayano on the top of her crying head and began to walk towards the emergency exit staircase with ease. Ayano screamed again and again as her fear-filled eyes stared at the fire approaching her in her death chair. Black smoke began to fill the room and suck all the precious oxygen away.

"And now... for Aito and Kiyora..." Shido said to himself as he left the floor through the emergency exit and left Ayano thrashing in the chair as the fire continued to consume everything and the temperature in the room soared.

Sweat formed across her body from fear and the heat as she thrashed about. She thrashed so much that she fell to her side and to the floor, taking the chair with her. Glancing one last time at the picture of her and Misao in such happy and innocent times made her fight and resist her established fate even more. The flames swallowed cubicles in its inferno and it marched closer and closer to Ayano while the rest of the building continued to burn. As she thrashed on the floor, she began to pull herself across the floor, though the flames continued to inch closer.

Feeling the waves of cool air outside, Shido walked casually to his car as if nothing had happened. When he arrived at his car on the isolated road near the firm, he turned back and saw the glowing orange burn brighter through the windows on the top floor. Smiling with satisfaction, he entered his car and began to drive away from the scene of yet another crime. He had the map in his head that would take him out of the city to Saitama where he planned on pursuing more relentless evil.

"Tsukasa says there's nothing in this world she's afraid of...not even of being raped. I'll have to put that statement to the test." Shido grinned. "We'll see how brave she is when her children are forced to watch me ride their mother."

In his mind, he was invincible as he drove down the empty road as darkness truly began to settle upon the land. He drove for several miles without a care in the world as he listened to the car's radio playing his favorite tunes

as he neared a traffic light. He saw the light change green and it allowed him to proceed through the intersection. As his car moved into the center of the intersection, it wasn't until then that a pair of headlights to his right caught his eye and he turned his head.

To his horror, he saw another car speeding towards him and it wasn't slowing down even though the light on that side of the road was red. There was no time for him to react. The speeding car aimed at Shido t-boned him on his driver's side, sending his car into a spin and echoing an unholy bang of crunching metal and shattering glass across the area. The speeding intruder car's front was smashed completely and broke the windshield while making the engine smoke. The car accident was quick and totaled both cars as they rested in the middle of the intersection, both smashed and smoking.

Shards of glass embedded in his face, Shido slowly looked up and felt the blood drip from his wounds as he struggled to make sense of what the hell just happened. He was alive but injured and could tell he had a broken leg and his vision blurred with his minor concussion. Turning his head to see the cause of the accident, he recognized the car instantly. He looked through the broken windshield of the other car and saw the deployed airbag begin to deflate and he realized he was in trouble when he saw the driver.

When the white airbag depleted itself of air, he looked into the burning pools of anger and hate in the eyes of Kagami Hiiragi. Her face was also scratched and bleeding but the look in her eyes showed she didn't care as she tried to free herself from her car. The accident wedged her door shut but she still continued to push and pound on her door as Shido decided it was time for him to leave. He could see it in her eyes and she was hell-bent on killing him and was willing to say fuck any and all consequences. His reign of terror was going to end at that intersection tonight.

What came next made this horrifying reality all the more real. The operating doors swung open again and Konata was rolled in on a gurney still awake and aware of her settings. Normally she would be asleep by now but she wanted to say her own goodbyes to Miyuki, as did the pink-haired doctor to her high school friend.

Miyuki stood above Konata and took her hand. "Are you sure this is what you want, Konata-san? Once we put you under the anesthesia, that'll be it."

Konata squeezed Miyuki's hand and nodded slowly. "I'm sure...just promise me you can save her. Don't let me die in vain."

Miyuki shook her head. "I won't let that happen, Konata-san. I will save your cousin and I'll tell Kagami-san that you love her. But I cannot help but feel that I failed you."

Shaking her head, Konata formed a sincere smile for Miyuki to see. "Don't think like that. If it weren't for you, both Yutaka and I wouldn't have stood a chance but you were able to give my cousin her life back. You're a hero, Miyuki."

Touched by her friend's words, Miyuki smiled in her saddened soul. "Thank you, Konata-san, but it is you who is the true hero here. Not many people would be willing to do this for their own cousin."

Konata nodded slowly. "Yutaka means more to me than just a cousin, you know. We had a unique set of circumstances handed to us, both good and

bad over the years."

Miyuki remained silent and held a firm grip on Konata's hand.

"Let me see her one more time." Konata requested.

Fighting the urge to cry, Miyuki nodded and rolled Konata's gurney next to the sleeping Yutaka's as the surgeons continued to prepare themselves for the operation. Minami watched closely and on the inside was thanking Konata from the bottom of her heart for preserving Yutaka like this. As much as Yutaka meant to Konata, the salmon-haired woman also meant a lot to the green-haired nurse as well, though she would never admit that.

Konata shifted her weakened body next to her sleeping cousin and spent several seconds just staring at her, letting her image sink into her brain. The blue-haired woman smiled and gently slid her hand across Yutaka's cheek and moved closer to her forehead and planted a soft kiss on her cranium. She whispered loving and supportive things for Yutaka, hoping she would hear them when she woke up and would learn that her older cousin sacrificed herself to save her. Konata knew it was going to be a painful trial for Yutaka after the whole ordeal was over, but hoped that one day Yutaka would be able to move on and find true happiness. Konata also thought about what Miyuki said one time about how much Minami cared about Yutaka. Yeah, that's right, Minami would take care of her for Konata.

As Miyuki continued to watch from a distance, she stood side-by-side with Minami and whispered, "Are you going to be okay?"

The quiet woman nodded once.

"Do you think I'm doing the right thing?" Miyuki asked and once again began rubbing her soon-to-be growing uterus.

Though Minami was a woman of few words, that didn't mean she didn't see things. Miyuki hadn't yet informed her that she was pregnant but after so many years of working as a nurse, women just gave off natural auras when they were with child. Ever since Miyuki took her pregnancy test and it came back positive, her whole happy and sweet demeanor increased, which was surprisingly possible. Now that she was pregnant and was planning on bringing a new life into the world and seeing a life about to leave it, she was beginning to have doubts and lose her confidence in herself.

"Listen to me, Miyuki. I'm a woman of few words for a reason and believe it or not, it usually has nothing to do with the fact that I'm nervous in social situations. It's because there are so little words in any language that can describe the splendor in this life. There is so much beauty in this world and every time I don't talk, it's simply because there's nothing else to say that could add to its elegance. I'm especially quiet around you." Minami divulged, making Miyuki blush. "I know that this is a horrible situation for everyone involved but even this has its beauty. Look at Konata."

Miyuki turned her head and saw Konata continue to hold her sleeping cousin close.

"It's moments like that that restore so much hope and faith in this already picturesque world." Minami added. "You and her are a lot alike in that regards. You're both gifts to mankind and I know you doubt yourself at times, but don't. Please don't do that. Nothing but purity exists within you and you'll be an incredible mother because you already make an incredible doctor."

Hearing the last sentence struck Miyuki deeply and she remembered she never told Minami about her pregnancy. It didn't surprise her that she knew, though and she simply smiled and to the nurse's surprise, Miyuki hugged her close.

Konata continued to hover above her cousin and whispered. "Remember, Yutaka. Never stop smiling for me. Always stay as happy and as charming as you were before and remember that I'll always love you. Now it's time to say goodbye."

Konata collected her cousin's hand and held it tight. She tried to suck in every bit of her cousin's existence as if it was the fountain of youth, but in her case, the last chance to feel her warmth. Something remarkable suddenly happened. Even though Yutaka was unconscious and sleeping soundly, her hand that was held by Konata suddenly twitched and her fingers wrapped themselves around the blue-haired woman's hand. It brought a tear to Konata's eyes and she was able to feel the essence of Yutaka's life through her hand. What troubled Konata was that they were beginning to slow down at frightening speeds and the petite salmon-haired woman began to feel colder and colder.

The blue-haired woman suddenly felt something strange in herself. Ever since this disease first unleashed itself inside her, she felt every worst kind

of pain imaginable and it has all led her to death's doorstep. This however was different and it once again revolved around her heart. Instead of a burning pain, it felt that it was slowly being squeezed by a human fist inside her body. She clenched her chest and her whole body felt like it was floating on a cloud while the rest of her organs began to cease their functions.

Closing her colorful green eyes, Konata uttered her last words. "Yutaka...? Mommy...?"

Simultaneously, Konata's body went limp and she collapsed on top of Yutaka and the two cousins' heartbeats stopped. The event triggered a full-blown panic in the operating room and the screaming beeps of digital medical equipment signaling the problem added to the ambush of clatter. One of the doctors pulled Konata off Yutaka and rested her body on her gurney and turned to Miyuki. All eyes were on her and now it was her decision.

"Dr. Broden, we need to operate now!" One of the doctors cried.

"Put them both on life support and prepare for surgery!" Miyuki ordered and rushed over to them. As she stood above the two cousins, something struck her.

Wait a minute...Konata-san told me to save her cousin...but this is a risky surgery. She consented to this operation to save Yutaka-san...but all of this has happened so fast and there are still so many scenarios that could go wrong. I wish I had the opportunity to run more tests. But that wasn't the

hand I was dealt. As I stand here, I can't help but think that maybe this isn't such a good idea. So many things could go wrong. I've never had a case like this before and I fear that it'll take my career in a much different direction when the smoke from this one clears. The workings of this procedure aren't the only things that are bothering me.

To the other doctors' horror, Miyuki stood above Konata and Yutaka frozen like a statue. The only movement was in her eyes as she bounced back and forth at the two cousins. Time was running out as the incessant beeps continued relentlessly and the panic was spreading as the doctors' leader stood and stared like a mannequin and both their patients were now technically dead.

"Dr. Broden, please make a decision! Is it Izumi or Kobayakawa?! Both of their hearts are failing and each passing second is one wasted to save them!" Another doctor yelled.

These transplant surgeries both have high risks of post-operation bleeding and both of them have already lost a lot of blood from their coughing, vomiting, and nosebleeds. If something goes wrong with Konata-san's lungs when they're transplanted, a bleed could occur and Yutaka-san could drown in her own blood. The same goes for Konata-san if she receives her cousin's liver. I once read a case where a liver transplant ended in complications and the patient requiring the liver suffered a major infection. If Konata-san suffers an infection, no amount of narcotics in the world would be able to take that kind of pain away. In fact...the pain allowed could shut Yutaka-san's liver down inside of her and she would die regardless.

"Dr. Broden! Dr. Broden!" Her name echoed.

And there are so many other ethical concerns that I should be considering. I have known these two women for so many years. They're like my sisters now and if one is going to die, then there's no doubt that they'll be devastated to no end. Now I'm beginning to wish that Kagami-san never called me to begin with! Why was I dragged into this?! This isn't what I signed up for! I cannot play the role of doctor, judge, and executioner all at once! I didn't go to medical school and move so far away just to come back and kill one of my friends!

"Dr. Broden, in the name of all that is holy...please...make...a...decision!"

To make matters worse, this decision is going to be killing a baby. Someone else's child. Someone that a family brought into this world and raised through so many good and bad times. And I'm going to be a mother in less than a year! I could never imagine my child in this situation! Lying on these gurneys while doctors hover over them and waiting for the order to cut them open! I can't take it anymore! I won't do this anymore!

Hyperventilating, covering her uterus with one hand, grabbing her hair with the other, gritting her teeth, shifting her eyes back and forth to both Konata's and Yutaka's lifeless bodies, she looked back at their heart rate monitors. The red flat line on the digital screen, the endless beeping, the doctors staring at her and crying her name was beginning to break her. Miyuki shifted her eyes again and saw Minami crouched next to Yutaka and holding her tight, her tear-soaked blue eyes staring at her begging to spare the salmon-haired woman.

The dramatic scene and all the images, memories, voices, and noises became one giant tidal wave from Hell. Miyuki's hearing faded as she looked at the screaming doctors staring at her, the crying Minami, the digital monitor screens flashing alert signs like unholy strobe lights. In the midst of the horrendous explosion of drama, a memory played in Miyuki's mind. When Miyuki first arrived and sat down with Konata for the first time in the hospital to talk to her and it was seconds before Yutaka came storming in the room to comfort her cousin. Three sentences that came from Miyuki's own mouth became her own undoing.

"This is my job; it's my livelihood. But more than that...this case is very near and dear to my heart, as you and Kagami-san are. I'm taking this very seriously and I won't rest until I cure you, Konata-san."

Miyuki felt as if a giant glass statue of herself shattered inside her mind and she could hear the glass break and collapse. The sound was horrid and unprecedented and it finally broke the strong and good-willed Miyuki. Grabbing her head and squeezing with all her might, Miyuki's eyes exploded with water and she released a deafening scream that rivaled every single noise in the room combined and she collapsed to her knees and finally to the floor, crying endlessly as the beeps indicating the end of Konata's and Yutaka's lives continued.

CHAPTER 22

With one final thrust, Shido was able to push the car door open and his porthole to freedom was open. More glass broke from the window and rained down on top of him as he continued to crawl out of the smoking car and he fell with a thud on the concrete. The palms of his hands were sliced open by the shards of glass on the street and the blood ran quickly but his

desperation trumped his pain. He could still hear Kagami pounding on her car door and he knew time was short.

Any attempts to stand and run were hindered by his broken leg so the only thing he could do now was crawl. He clawed his way through the shards of broken glass and pieces of debris on the concrete and tried desperately to find a means of escape. The blaring police sirens only grew louder and closer while he pulled himself across the pavement further away from his damaged car. The pain from his broken leg only intensified as he crawled and he could feel more injuries inside his body but still clung to hope that he could flee the scene and make it to Saitama to extract his final bits of violence against the Hiiragi family.

Getting further away from his car, the pain in his leg suddenly electrified and he screamed loudly as the aching shockwaves consumed his leg and body and he quickly turned and looked up. To his horror, the bleeding Kagami Hiiragi was standing above him with her foot crushing his broken leg as she looked down at him with a look of pure hatred. Blood continued to drip from the wounds on her face while one of her pigtails came undone in the wreck, creating a more intimidating atmosphere around her.

What only made this situation even worse for Shido was when he saw Kagami also grip a wooden baseball bat in her left hand. Kagami began to twist her foot and put more pressure on his wound, making the broken bones inside shift and creak inside his flesh, triggering him to scream more. As she sent the endless waves of pain into Shido's body, her facial features remained unchanged as she stood above him. She remembered all the horrific things he put her through leading up to this moment.

Even before Shido went for the big times and invaded her firm, he worked his decadent magic against her to break down her self-worth and the strength that made Kagami one of a kind. She gave herself to this man, thinking that he would do his duty as any significant other and fulfill his obligations to love, cherish, protect, and accept everything about her without question. Instead, every time Kagami took a shower, she still felt dirty and used. The things he would do to her behind closed doors to make her feel like less than nothing. Physical, mental, sexual, all of it made her cringe and as she reminisced about it all, it didn't work for Shido as he was on the receiving end of all her thoughts.

When Kagami stopped her torture of him long enough, he panted deeply and replied with a childish and innocent tone. "Now, now, don't be angry, Kagami. You don't want to do anything rash, right? We're lovers...aren't we? You wouldn't want to do anything to hurt the man you love and need, right?"

Hearing this only tightened Kagami's stare at him and she also constricted her grip on her wooden bat. She stepped off his wound and slowly backed away, making Shido think he may be in the clear.

"I have a feeling that I'll be able to change Konata's mind about how she feels about baseball after this." Kagami said with anger in her voice and raised the bat above her head. "You have the right to remain silent...or I'll bash your face in!"

Kagami swung the bat down with all her might and the instrument struck Shido's right knee cap, shattering it like the glass windows of the cars and he vocalized the breaking the pain. He squirmed on the ground but the

further pain in his leg hindered him from getting up and running away as Kagami raised the bat up high again.

"You have the right to an attorney...but you won't need one because I'm going to kill you!" Kagami yelled and swung the bat down again, making sharp contact with Shido's broken leg and deepened his fracture and deepening the scream he unleashed as he continued to jump and thrash like a fish out of water. "You know what the worst thing about killing you is, Shido? I can only do it once!"

Shido continued to hold his hands up in defense. "Don't do this, Kagami! What have I ever done to you, except try and make you a better person?!"

"The level of your corruption and depravity continues to surprise and sicken me. To think that I once had feelings for a monster like you. To think I let you talk to me...to hold me...to kiss me...to touch me..." Her emotions heated up upon her last statement and swung the bat downward again, breaking his hand and making him cry again. "And what you did to my family! I would've endured it all if it meant you would've left them alone in peace! You murdered my father, you framed my mother, you tried to turn my own niece and nephew against me! You beat my lover within an inch of her life! You murdered Ayano Minegishi!"

Shido knew Kagami had him right where she wanted and knew it was over for him. Yet, he still felt victorious over Kagami by taking her father and friends away from her. Still rolling in pain, he smiled at Kagami which only deepened her endless animosity for him. To rub salt in the wounds, he also started laughing when he heard Kagami mention Ayano Minegishi, knowing that she should've been reduced to a pile of ashes by now.

"That's right, Kagami. I murdered your father and your friend from high school. The one you took in and gave a second chance to when she was ostracized for being unfaithful. Once again, I'm stunned that you made it so easy for me to take someone you love away from you." Shido said with satisfaction. Knowing that Kagami was planning on killing him no matter what, he decided to get his final words in. "You can kill me if you want, Kagami, but you'll never be able to erase the memories we shared together. Remember, Kagami, killing me will never bring back the ones you love and no matter who you fall in love with, it was me that took your virginity and degraded you in the bedroom. It was me that had you every and any way I wanted whenever I wanted. Remember the night I introduced a little bit of bondage into our bedroom routine with the belt and you begged me not to while you cried like the scared little girl you are? I do...oh so fondly..."

Kagami's glare tightened yet again. Tightening her grip on her bat, she lifted it up high with the intent of using every muscle in her body to thrust it down onto Shido's head. She would continue to strike him over and over again while picturing his assault on Konata in her mind every time she hit him and how this was payback for the blue-haired love of her life. Kagami had never killed another human before but had a feeling she would have an easy time getting over any following guilt as she tightened her fists wrapped around the bat's handle.

"As they say in America...batter up, bitch." She hissed but didn't initially notice the red and blue flashing lights of police cars approach the intersection with their sirens blaring.

When their brakes made the cars come to a screeching halt, it caught Kagami's attention as she still stood above Shido with the bat over her head.

and ready to launch it onto his head. She heard the police officers exit their cars, draw their weapons, and try to control the situation.

"Drop your weapon and put your hands in the air!" One of the cops ordered.

Kagami slowly turned her head and looked at the scene in front of her. Nearly a dozen police cars with flashing red and blue lights illuminating the area surrounded her with twice as many officers pointing their firearms at her, ready to pull the trigger at any moment. Kagami's heart continued to pound in her chest as her final act of vengeance and justice was about to be played out but now it seemed that it would be yet another hollowed dream. Another police officer shouted the same command for her to drop the baseball bat and surrender herself.

"That's her, officers! That's the woman who murdered Tadao Hiiragi and Patricia Martin! She also burned her own law firm and murdered her secretary as well! Shoot her before she kills again! Shoot her! Shoot her!" Shido yelled to the police as Kagami continued to stand above him.

"You coward...you bastard...!" Kagami focused her attention back onto Shido and was ready to put an end to his life. Knowing that if she did, she would be cut down by the officers' bullets didn't even process in her mind.

"Kagami, don't!" A familiar voice yelled in the crowd of police officers.

Kagami shifted her eyes to the officers again and saw Yui Narumi push her way to the front.

"Don't do it, Kagami! We have him now and you've won! It's over! Don't do anything stupid that would bring this to a tragic end!" Yui cried to her, finding herself in another unique situation courtesy of the Hiiragi twins.

"But he killed my father!" Kagami yelled at the top of her lungs, still standing above him and ready to strike. "He took away the man I idolized in my life! The man that taught me right and wrong, the importance of school, and the importance of a family's love! Without him, I wouldn't be the woman I am! Shido stole him from me!"

"We know, Kagami, we know!" Yui called. "We have the evidence we need now! I give you my word that this trash will never be free again! So please...drop the bat and let us take him into custody!"

Seeing this back and forth was beginning to wear Kagami down, Shido tried to further capitalize on it. His creepy, snake-like voice hissed, "Kagami... Kagami...look at me..."

Her upper lip quivering, Kagami glanced back down at Shido, her bat still hovering behind her head. Shido smirked and said, "If you don't kill me, I promise you I'll be back on the streets within a week. Your family will never know another safe day again in their lives...especially your niece and nephews. And especially that little Kiyora. When I walk again, I promise you I will not only kill your family members, but I will keep Kiyora alive for myself...forever. She'll be your replacement."

Feeling her rage boiling, Kagami's wrists began to tremble and she was only one broken nerve away from smashing Shido's head open. However, it would also bring deadly consequences for her as well, which was exactly what Shido wanted. If he was going to go down, he was hell-bent on taking Kagami with him.

"Don't listen to him, Kagami! He's trying to crawl inside your head and bait you into killing him! Don't fall for it! Please, for the love of god...don't fall for it!" Yui cried. "Don't take the law into your own hands! Think about Konata! You love my cousin, right?! How would this affect her if you did this and we were forced to open fire on you?!"

Hearing this name froze Kagami just as she was about to hammer down on Shido's skull. Yui was right. There was someone waiting for her and needed her...or was there? Kagami still didn't know the fates of either Konata or Yutaka as the surgery was still ongoing but there was still a chance. There was still a chance Miyuki picked Konata despite the blue-haired woman's request and plan. However, Kagami was also unaware of Miyuki's mental breakdown, which was also ongoing. Regardless, hearing the name of the woman she loved began to soothe the savage beast within Kagami and she slowly began to lower the baseball bat.

"Aw...don't tell me you're going soft on me, Kagami. Would it help if I told you that I was able to give Ayano one final round of pleasure when I raped her on her desk before I burned her alive?" Shido continued to poke with lies as he rested on the road below Kagami, still in serious pain and becoming delusional because of it. "I just want you to know...I called her Tsukasa when I pounded her over and over again as she cried for it to stop."

Kagami froze again and her grip once again tightened on her bat. She raised it high again and looking down at Shido, her eyes said "goodbye" and it happened. However, it wasn't what everyone was expecting to happen. Kagami halted her death strike on Shido but only after another voice cried her name from the crowd. It wasn't Yui's; it was someone else. The sweet, bell-like voice with so much femininity in it called out to her and Kagami slowly turned her head.

Her eyes flooded with tears when she saw two police officers escort the living and breathing Ayano Minegishi to the front of the maddening ensemble and as close to Kagami as the police would allow her to get. A blanket was wrapped around her shoulders and her face was covered in dust and soot from the fire that had so far consumed four floors of Kagami's law firm building. Her eyes were still flooded with tears and her nose was red as her emotions flared and approached her friend to try and talk her down off this cliff Kagami was putting herself at the top of.

"Kagami...don't do it! Let the police arrest him!" Ayano pleaded as the police moved away from her and let her and Kagami have their one-on-one.

"Ay...Ayano...you're alive." She choked as a tear slipped from her eye and Shido stared at her with an angry and shocked face.

"Yes, Kagami, I'm alive." She said calmly to her while holding the blanket over her shoulders. "I was able to escape and the firefighters were able to save me and take me away from the building."

"But...but how?" Kagami asked as she still held the bat over her head and Shido also listened closely.

As she laid on the floor tied to the chair, Ayano never once accepted her fate to be cooked alive by the flames as they neared her. She decided to fight for her life and thrashing as hard as she could, she bounced herself away from the approaching flames as they continued to devour everything they touched and she felt the floor beneath her heating up. A sudden crackling sound was heard, followed by a massive bang and when she looked up, half of the entire floor collapsed downward to the next level beneath as the fires continued to roar. As Ayano continued to kick and struggle her way away, she bumped into another desk, knocking several office supplies over, one of them was a large paper cutter and the handle fell open, brandishing the blade. Ayano got an idea when she saw the metal blade glow in the fire's reflection and she moved her bounded wrists to it and began rubbing the rope across the blade. She rubbed as fast as she could as the temperature continued to rise higher and higher. As she rubbed, the flames reached the ceiling and pieces of it began to collapse around her. Finally, the rope binding her hands behind the chair broke and she was free. She quickly stood and ripped off the piece of duct tape covering her mouth but she was able to quickly ignore the pain and dash for the emergency exit stairwell Shido used to escape. As she neared it, the building buckled again and to her horror, a large burning piece of the ceiling collapsed in front of the door, blocking her only escape route. Looking around desperately for a way out, she suddenly spotted the ironic porthole to freedom. She eyed the metal hatch of the garbage chute where she dumped Kagami's family picture and her own family necklace at Shido's orders. Ayano quickly dashed to it and ripped the large metal door open and looked down. It was still pitch black but she knew it led to freedom and that was good enough for her. It was a tight squeeze but her slender body allowed her to fit in and with one final prayer, she let go and gravity took care of the rest. She plummeted the entire way down and screaming every second of the way until the large metal chute slowly leveled out and she saw the flashing red and blue lights at the end of the tunnel. Ayano burst out of the chute's exit and landed in the packed dumpster with a thud. Though she was cushioned by piles of

garbage and her life was spared, she continued to scream relentlessly while holding her head and crying. It was her cries that caught the attention of a firefighter and he rushed to her and was able to pull her out of the dumpster.

Blinking quickly after the traumatizing memory replayed itself in her mind, Ayano shook her head fiercely. "That's not important now, Kagami. I'll tell you later but please put the bat down and let these officers take him away. Listen to Yui!"

Kagami couldn't even begin to describe the waves of relief she felt knowing that one of her oldest friends was safe and not another victim of Shido's evil mind and actions. Once again, her grip on her weapon trembled and to everyone's relief, she slowly lowered the bat and began to step away from Shido, still groaning in agony on the street. Police officers moved closer with their weapons still raised and Kagami dropped the bat, making it sound an echo across the intersection and she stepped away as Ayano moved up and hugged Kagami, who also hugged her back and she began to escort Kagami away. Ayano whispered more warming and supportive things to Kagami, who was still clearly shaken from the whole ordeal that now seemed to be over.

The police forced Shido to roll on his stomach as he continued to grovel in the pain inflicted onto him as he felt the police cuff one of his hands while saying, "Koichi Shido, you're under arrest for the murder of Tadao Hiiragi and Patricia Martin."

Ayano wrapped an arm around Kagami's shoulder and pulled her tight as they walked side-by-side. Kagami did the same thing and even turned and kissed her friend on her head where she saw a bump, probably from Shido's

attack on her. Ayano took a deep breath and whispered, "Now, let's go make you happy forever."

Kagami smiled just as Shido lifted his head and he looked at her. He was defeated and he knew it, which triggered his emotions to broil in uncontrollable anger and hate for the twin-tailed woman. With one cuff already on his hand and the other also about to be bounded by the police officers, Shido made his final move. With quick and sudden fury, he quickly grabbed the officer's hand that was about to cuff him and he pulled him down. Shido quickly spun onto his side and eyed the police officer's firearm sitting in its holster and without a second thought, he grabbed it, pulled it out, and held it high and pointed the weapon at Kagami.

"Kagami...!" His psychopathic voice tore through the intersection as he cocked the hammer just as Kagami turned and looked down the barrel of the pistol and the police still struggled to make sense of what was happening.

Kagami saw the weapon in Shido's possession and she saw her life flash before her eyes, followed by the flash of the gun firing before she closed her eyes and waited for it to end.

Yui quickly acted when she saw the blood fly from Shido's final attack on an innocent woman. Reacting out of her old police training, she quickly reached into the holster she had tucked into her belt, grasped her revolver, and held it high. She fired a single shot and as fast as the attack happened, it was silenced when Yui's bullet entered Koichi Shido's forehead and the back of his head erupted like a volcano and he went limp. As silence fell upon them, everyone tried to make sense of what just happened within the last four seconds. They looked and saw Koichi Shido now stretched on the

pavement with massive amounts of blood rushing out of the back of his head and out of the single circular wound in his forehead. The devil dressed in black was now dead.

Gulping, Yui turned her trembling head to the victim and saw Kagami not on the ground and bleeding, but standing tall and blocking her face out of instinct with her arms while looking away. When the twin-tailed woman slowly opened her eyes and saw she was still standing, she looked down and saw yet another horrifying sight. Ayano Minegishi was curled at her feet and holding her chest as it bled from the bullet wound. She had taken the bullet for Kagami when she jumped in front of her.

"We need medics over here now!" Yui commanded the scene but received disheartening news that they were still at the scene of the fire believing more people were trapped inside.

"Ayano!" Kagami cried and fell to her knees and collected the woman in her arms and held her tight. She rolled her over to look at her and to her shock, Ayano was still alive but barely and she clung to life. Ayano coughed and sputtered a bit of blood from her mouth as Kagami held her and once again found herself weeping over another person about to lose their life at the hands of the devil in black.

"Ayano...why...?" Was all Kagami could muster as she let a tear fall from her eye and it splashed on Ayano's cheek.

Struggling to find her voice, Ayano was finally able to mutter her final words. "You...you gave me my life back...Kagami. You took me in...you

forgave my mistake. I...I...I wanted...to...return...the...favor. Thank you, Kagami. Thank you..."

The life in Ayano's once picturesque blue eyes faded and her pupils dilated, signaling the end of her life and her breathing finally ceased. When her body went limp in Kagami's clutches, all she could do was scream her name again and cry over her body as paramedics arrived at the scene, thought there was nothing they could do for Ayano. They allowed Kagami to cry over her fallen friend for a few for minutes until the distraught twin-tailed woman looked up and saw medics arrive at Shido's body.

She watched them scoop Shido's body up and place it in a black body bag. More tears fell from Kagami's eyes when she saw his face disappear under the zipper when the bag was closed and he was carried away. The nightmare for her was over...but the pain still continued. Kagami looked down at Ayano's body still in her arms and let another tear drop onto the deceased woman's body. Kagami sniffed again at not only because she had lost another friend, but because she was so touched that so many people existed in this world that wanted to see her happy and nothing more.

As she sat on the concrete holding Ayano's body, she felt Yui's hand touch her shoulder. "The hospital called. The surgery is over. We need to go now."

Staring into space, Kagami slowly lowered her head and rested her forehead on Ayano's. Holding her tight one last time, she simply whispered, "Thank you, Ayano Minegishi. Thank you."

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It was like a family gathering outside of the operating room at the hospital. Kagami Hiiragi and Sojiro Izumi sat side-by-side with each other on one bench while Yui Narumi stood opposite them with her back against the wall and rubbing her lower lip gently with her index finger while resting her thumb on her chin. The time continued to march on and Yui's eyes were glued on the clock above Kagami and Sojiro. They had been waiting for nearly three hours to hear news of the surgery's results while the doctors continued to monitor the lone survivor and make sure there were no further complications. The clock read 11:15 pm now.

However, they weren't there for the ones they loved. They were there for each other. Regardless of how this ended, they knew that before this night was over, worlds were going to be shattered and all three of them were going to need a pair of arms to catch them when they would react to the inevitable bad news.

"She...she saved my life..." Kagami whispered as she held her tear-soaked handkerchief.

Yui looked down at Kagami. "She was a brave woman. You must have been extra special to Minegishi for her to throw herself into the path of Shido's bullet like that."

Gulping, Kagami felt more tears coming. She was so sick of crying all the time at this point and wanted all this torment to be over but knew that more was soon to come from Miyuki. "I just wanted to help her. She came to me one night crying and I took her in and she told me her boyfriend threw her

out and Misao stopped talking to her. All she wanted was a second chance and I gave it to her...and now she's dead because of it."

"This wasn't your fault, Kagami. No one could've predicted that it was going to end like that." Yui quickly replied, still keeping her index finger and thumb at her mouth. "Like I said...Minegishi wouldn't have done that if she didn't think you were worth it. It just goes to show how much you're loved and respected by so many people. I know this doesn't offer any consolation, but you can take comfort in the fact that Shido is dead."

Kagami slowly glanced up. "And what about you, Yui?"

"What about me?"

"You never killed anybody before...right?"

Yui's eyes glanced away and she tried to hide her deep emotional scar.

"You're right, I never even had to draw my weapon before let alone fire it and shoot someone with it. I'll be okay, though. I always knew it was part of the job and the risk of that happening always existed."

"The police units let you keep that pistol when you retired?" Kagami asked.

Yui nodded. "Though I'm not a cop anymore, they let me tagalong when I told them I knew you and was familiar with the situation. They thought I

would be able to talk you out of killing Shido."

Kagami looked down again and couldn't help but think of the irony. The police brought Yui along to try and save Shido, yet in the end it was her that shot and killed him. Still, Kagami knew that she was right when she said no one could've predicted how that story was going to end for the corrupt lawyer. Now, Kagami felt a new sense of freedom knowing he would never terrorize her or her family again and now all of her future was in fate's hands.

"I just hope that all of this was worth it in the end..." Kagami whispered and she continued to focus her attention downward.

Because of all her years as a police officer, Yui could see the fears of uncertainty and the unknown in Kagami's eyes. She sighed and slowly walked over to Kagami and bent down to her level, catching her attention. Yui slowly wrapped her arms around the twin-tailed woman and hugged her tight. The gesture, though as warm as it was, took Kagami by surprise and she didn't know exactly what to do next.

"If Konata lives through this, I expect you to always love and cherish her, just as she always will for you." Yui whispered. "If Yutaka lives through this, I expect you to always love and cherish her, just as Konata would've wanted. This is going to be a very painful experience for all of us, but we'll get through it somehow."

Kagami slowly lifted her arms up and hugged Yui closely. It was a truly redefining moment for them and it was Yui's way of accepting Kagami into

her life permanently, no matter how this medical quagmire was going to end for them.

After staying silent for so long, Sojiro Izumi cleared his throat and covered his face with his hands. He was clearly crying from the stress of this torture and Yui disconnected her hug from Kagami and sat next to her uncle who she became close to after Kanata's death. She also hugged him tight around his shoulders while patting his back as he wept for the possible departure of his only daughter and child.

"I know what you're thinking, uncle. You're questioning yourself and you're wondering if you were a good enough father for Konata. I've seen this countless times when I was a cop and I've also seen these feelings of self-doubt destroy people from the inside-out." Yui whispered. "I don't want to hear one word of doubt come from your mouth. When your wife passed away, you eventually came back for Konata after you mourned and you were there ever since. It was all the love and support you gave her that allowed her to grow up in a perfect household and it enabled her to find a successful career doing the things she loved. Her positive outlook on life is all because of you, uncle. Don't ever forget that. Even up until now, all she could feel was happiness because of the woman sitting next to you."

Sojiro slowly turned his face and looked at Kagami through his tear-soaked eyes. She smiled while also crying and for the first time, hugged Konata's father. Kagami held him close and whispered, "Thank you. Thank you for giving Konata to me."

Hearing the kind words coming from Kagami helped soothe the hurt in his heart. He hugged Kagami back to also feel the warmth and the love the twin-tailed woman felt in her heart for his daughter and he felt complacent.

He sniffed again as he let go of his daughter's lover and the three sat next to each other, trying not to think about why they were there, but ultimately how they would live when they left.

Suddenly, movement caught their eyes and the large hospital doors swung open and they quickly stood when they saw Miyuki slowly walk out of the operating room. Her face was flushed red and her eyes were puffy from the tears she spewed, which was to be expected. Everything went silent for them as they held each other's hands and Miyuki stopped short of them, hesitated, but her doctor's professionalism kept her walking until she stood before them.

Looking at them with her puffy eyes, she began to explain the complications that ensued before the surgery even commenced. She explained the actions they took, the procedure, and ultimately the end result. Though Yui was initially there for Kagami and Sojiro, they now had to be there for her when she collapsed to the ground and cried.

Yutaka Kobayakawa passed away at 10:22 pm.

Konata Izumi survived the surgery.

CHAPTER 23

It was the intense burning of agony that awoke Miyuki's living patient from her drug-induced slumber. Her abdomen was on fire and she was so weak as her senses began to return. Something had happened to her but the last

twelve hours of her life were a hazy blur and nothing made sense as she stared into the dark abyss before her. All that she could fathom was that her abdomen was burning but to her surprise, other than that, she felt fine. The only other thing that bothered her was she was very thirsty and hoped that somehow she could relieve herself of this unwanted sensation. She tried to open her eyes but found it quite difficult as even her eyelids were too weak to open on her own strength. Aside from feeling weak, thirsty, and uncomfortable in her abdomen area, she tried to rock back and forth on the padded and comfortable bed beneath her.

Voices suddenly echoed but they weren't her own. Was she imagining them? No. These voices were real and they were coming from beyond the darkness before her. They were inaudible and sounded like echoes in a vast cave but the more she heard them, the clearer they slowly became.

"...Konata..." A voice said.

That voice. I know that voice. Is it...?

As she continued to groan in her agony on the bed, a light suddenly began to develop horizontally before her. Her eyelids were beginning to open and white light blinded her as the coverings over her eyes continued to part. She thought she was dead. Dead? But how? What happened within the last twelve hours? As the white light suddenly became brighter, the memory suddenly flashed itself in her mind. She remembered hovering over her salmon-haired cousin to say her final goodbyes before darkness engulfed her vision and now she saw the light. She felt at peace as she thought she was heading for the afterlife.

Yu-chan...stay strong...stay healthy...stay happy...

The light suddenly engulfed her vision and she was basking in it. She waited for the light to clear and to see the afterlife, but it suddenly wasn't meant to be. The white light suddenly moved away and Konata Izumi stared at a blue ceiling as she felt the presence of human activity around her. She shifted her tired eyes to her right and saw a pink-haired woman put a flashlight away in her lab coat pocket while watching the digital monitor she was attached to by many wires and cords. Her voice was still a near-incomprehensible gargle as Konata tried to make sense of what was happening. She thought she was in the afterlife after she made Miyuki promise to save her cousin, yet she was still in the hospital. Did they abandon the surgery and think of something else.

"...Konata..." The same voice said again and this time Konata was able to tell it was coming from her left.

Shifting her eyes to her left, she saw an image that made her heart pound with delight. Kagami was sitting next to her and holding her hand with both of hers and rubbing it gently, but she was also crying. Why was she crying? Did something bad happen? She was alive and as far as Konata knew, so was Yutaka because Konata trusted Miyuki. There was no way Miyuki would've done something to jeopardize her little cousin, not after Konata showed how much she needed Yutaka to live on.

Kagami guided one of her hands to a table sitting next to her and to Konata's relief, the twin-tailed love of her life grasped a cup of water with a straw in it and guided it to her mouth. Konata quickly inhaled the water and felt even better as the cold liquid splashed in her stomach and moistened her mouth again. When she had her fill, she stopped drinking and Kagami put

the water aside and quickly sandwiched Konata's hand between her two. Konata still couldn't understand why her lover was crying.

She tried to clear her throat to speak but despite the fact she was able to moisten her esophagus again, her pipes were as stiff as metal bars. Trying to speak made her throat sting in pain but Konata was adamant about talking to her lover, which Kagami could see. Kagami tightened her sandwich grip on Konata's hand and nestled her face onto it but this action only furthered the blue-haired woman's fear. Did something happen?

"Konata-san, please don't try to force yourself to speak. Your body is very weak right now and you must stay in bed for awhile." Miyuki's voice said and Konata shifted her eyes to her again and saw the pink-haired doctor return to her with a tongue depressor and her flashlight. She pried Konata's mouth open and shined the light in to see the condition. "Your vocal cords are still stiff but that'll go away in about an hour."

Miyuki pulled the two instruments away and Konata continued to try and make sense of what was happening around her. There were so many things she wanted to say, even scream if she had to if it would get everyone's attention. She wanted to know why she was still on Earth but more importantly, she wanted to see her little cousin and talk to her.

Konata looked back at Kagami again and tried to signal to her lover that she wanted to talk. However, Kagami knew Konata well enough by this point to know what the blue-haired woman was thinking. Kagami tried to keep a poker face for her and tried to redirect the topic away from what Konata wanted onto a distraction. She planned on playing dumb and innocent as long as she could as a means of procrastination to find a way to break this impending heartache that was about to rip into Konata.

"It's okay, Konata. Miyuki is saying you're going to be just fine and if nothing else happens you'll make a full recovery." Kagami's hastened voice sounded panicked and distraught but the twin-tailed woman spoke the truth.

Barring no further complications from the surgery, Konata was going to make a full recovery and hopefully be able to live a normal life. However, there were still strings attached to this possible future but Kagami didn't care about any of that. As she has proven before, the twin-tailed woman was willing to go above and beyond for the one she loved and vowed to stay with her forever. In Kagami's mind it was going to get a lot better because she felt waves of euphoria within herself knowing that the demon in human form that haunted every corner of her mind was now dead. However, this passionate euphoria was mixed with extreme despondency because within an hour, Konata was going to ask a question and would be devastated by the answer.

With each passing minute, Kagami continued to try and figure out a way to tell Konata, but how? How could she possibly tell someone like Konata that her cousin, who was as close to her as any other sibling, was now gone and it was her liver that allowed her to keep her life. Even when the hour came and went, Kagami was still at a loss for words but still remained by Konata's side as her blue-haired lover began to find her voice again. It was weak and it was frail but words were slowly beginning to reemerge from her mouth.

Kagami gulped when she heard the simple sentence, "Yutaka...where...?"

Tightening her grip on Konata's hand, Kagami let another tear slip from her eyes and Konata watched it roll down her cheek and splash on her hand. Something was wrong and seeing this made Konata's heart speed up, showing on the computer monitors. As Kagami opened her mouth to tell her, she felt the warming touch of Miyuki's hand wrap around her shoulder and gently squeeze. It was the doctor's way of telling her this wasn't going to have to be her cross to bear, which Kagami acknowledged by gently patting Miyuki's hand with her free one.

Kagami slowly let go of Konata, furthering the blue-haired woman's fear of bad news as Miyuki sat and took her lover's place by collecting her hand and holding it. Miyuki gently stroked the bandaged hand from Shido's violent attack on her and sighed deeply. Though Miyuki didn't know Yutaka as well as she did Konata, she knew that a family bond had been broken and the only thing it was going to create was pain.

"Konata-san...I've been a doctor for over ten years now...and I have never had a case as unique and challenging as this. I imagine you want to know what happened in that operating room the other night." Miyuki opened, took another deep breath, and continued. "When you were saying goodbye to Yutaka-san, your heart arrhythmia returned and Yutaka-san went into cardiac arrest. I put you both on life support but I had to weigh all consequences of any decision I would make. A heart arrhythmia isn't as serious as cardiac arrest and cardiac arrest takes a heavier toll on the body, especially during any recovery process."

Blinking once, Konata whispered, "Miyuki..."

"Konata-san...my decision was to save you...and to let Yutaka pass away. She passed away last night...and her liver is what is keeping you alive

now." Miyuki said with deep remorse as she closed her eyes. "I considered the long term and I concluded that because of Yutaka-san's previous medical history and trips to the hospital, her chances of surviving the surgery and recovery process were only about thirty percent. There was a seventy percent chance that she would've passed away regardless and you would still be gone. Konata-san...I'm so sorry this had to happen to you."

Miyuki was curious by the absence of any kind of reaction and she slowly opened her eyes. When she saw Konata, she didn't know what to make of her reaction. Nothing was there. Konata continued to stare at her with her green eyes that didn't seem to be reacting in any way to the upsetting news regarding her cousin. Normally eyes would flood with tears, they would tremble, dart in every direction in panic, or the life essence in them would simply fade. Miyuki couldn't see any of this in Konata and didn't know what to make of it as she continued to gaze into Konata's endless stare.

Keeping her sincere and loving voice, Miyuki added, "I cannot even begin to imagine how you feel and I won't pretend that I do. I just want you to know that this was without a doubt the hardest decision I had to make. There are a few things you should know about your recovery process but for now I think its best that you continue to rest and heal."

Miyuki slowly stood and gently released Konata's hand, who let it plop onto the bed as if she was dead as well. The act was so convincing that Miyuki caught herself looking up at the digital monitors to make sure Konata was still alive and when this was confirmed for her, she turned and began to walk out of the hospital room. While Kagami took her seat next to Konata again and as Miyuki was about to grip the doorknob, something broke the uneasy harmony.

"Stop."

Miyuki froze when the voice registered in her mind to belong to Konata. She turned her head back and saw the short, blue-haired woman staring at her still but her gaze had suddenly shifted. Unnerving Miyuki, she saw Konata's cheeks begin to turn red and her eyebrows began to melt together to form a budding frown with the potential to show immense anger. Kagami also stared at her lover and unsure what to do.

"Ye...yes, Konata-san? Is there anything I can do or get for you?" Miyuki asked politely.

Miyuki was barely able to finish her friendly gesture when it happened to her. The single worst assault she had ever received in her life, let alone from a patient who also happened to be her friend. It was quick, it was violent, but worst of all, it was genuine. The outburst Konata unleashed into the hospital room was honest and it was clear that she meant every word of it. It had begun mounting when Miyuki told her that her beloved cousin had passed and now the rage had boiled over. With every venomous word that shot out of Konata's mouth, Miyuki felt as if each utterance was a whip of barbed wire across her body.

"You liar! You lying, backstabbing bitch! You betrayed me and you left my little cousin to die alone and scared on some fucking gurney?! How could you, Miyuki, how could you?! Yutaka was all alone and I promised that I would give my life to save her and you took that away from both of us! She was my family! I loved her like a sister! No, she was my sister! I was an only child just like you and it changed my life for the better when she moved in with me! You should know this because you're an only child too

and yet you made this decision that has broken me! I hate you, I hate you, I hate you...!"

"Konata, stop!" Kagami cried but Konata continued her vicious onslaught.

"It was my dream to have a full family with a sibling and even a mother because I never had that! I thought that out of all people you would've been the one who would understand that the most but instead, you murdered my cousin! I have Kagami, but Yutaka gave me an emotional bond that only Yutaka could which Kagami knows exists between her and Tsukasa and you severed that tie! I cannot even begin to contemplate why you did this to me, Miyuki! I thought you were my friend and you were going to make everything better for me and Yutaka but you only ended up murdering her! Where was that once sweet and caring personality when you were hovering over her like a vulture waiting for her to die and harvest her organs?! How could you ever justify such a horrible act?! Where was that maternal instinct you showed for Tsukasa's kids when you were about to cut her open?! It's a good thing you're not a mother because you would suck at it! A child would be better off being raised in a dumpster instead of you! You're a sick, twisted, murdering freak! Burn in hell Miyuki, burn in hell!"

After Konata's final rant, she was physically exhausted and breathed deeply as she plopped back onto her bed and continued to pant in sheer anger. She didn't even see the tears fall from Miyuki's eyes as she covered her face and ran out of the hospital room. Despite the venomous words, Miyuki was somehow able to understand why Konata was so upset but it was the maternal tirade that hit her where it hurt the most. Even though Miyuki was highly intelligent, she was still human and prone to fear when a sudden and drastic lifestyle change for her was near, this one being her pregnancy.

When the crying Miyuki sprinted out of the room, Kagami's angry side reared. "How could you say such horrible things to her?! She saved your life, damn it! If I never called her you and Yutaka would both be dead by now!"

"But Yutaka is still dead...! She made that decision to kill Yutaka! She took my sister away...! My family! She broke my dream of a family...!" Konata screamed again, making the digital monitors spike.

"Please, please calm down Konata! You just survived surgery and if you put more stress on yourself you could die!" Kagami cried as she too felt her eyes flood and she grasped her lover's shoulders. "Please calm down! Don't take yourself away from me! I love you...!"

Hearing those last three words suddenly began to soothe the ailing blue-haired woman as her abdomen continued to burn. She clutched the swollen but healing bulge the scar created where Yutaka's liver rested within in. Knowing that she was now living off her cousin's organ only pained Konata more and her bitter anger towards Miyuki worsened. Kagami on the other hand had had enough of the drama and was at the breaking point as her knees began to quiver and she buried her face into the bed sheet and wept.

Through her broken weeps, Kagami was able to say, "I'm sorry...I'm so sorry, Konata. I just...I just want all of this to be over. Shido is dead so he can't hurt us anymore...but you're still in pain. Please...please stop all of this. Let me take you home and take care of you...forever. Live for me, Konata. Live for me...and Yutaka..."

Kagami's tears continued to stain the sheet as she cried and clutched the soft cloth in her palms as Konata rested next to her. Another tear slipped from Konata's eyes as she looked up at the ceiling and continued to wish that it was her. Kagami's words still weren't sinking into the blue-haired woman's head. Miyuki did save Konata and risked a lot to do so and ultimately had to sacrifice someone in the process; a decision that is every doctor's worst nightmare. Another thing that Kagami said was also true; that if Miyuki never came to them, Konata would've succumbed to her disease and Yutaka would also show the same symptoms until it too would ultimately take her. Despite the fact that one was spared, the feelings were not. All Konata could do at this point was cry as Kagami also sobbed.

After the deep emotional outbursts and consequential crying that followed, a knock was heard on the door a few minutes later. Before either Konata or Kagami could respond, the door opened and to their shock, Minami Iwasaki slowly walked in and closed the door behind her. She approached them and tried her best to hide her face, though the couple knew why.

"Mi...Minami..." Kagami opened as she dried her eyes.

"I...I just...I just wanted to...offer...my condolences...to the family of..." Minami tried her best to remain tough, strong, and professional, but it was no good.

Minami quickly covered her reddening face and cried into her open palms as her knees buckled and she too collapsed to the ground and cried. Kagami acted and sat on the floor next to the green-haired woman and hugged her tightly while Konata could only rest on her back again and turn away. The blue-haired woman's anger was so intense that she truly believed that no one understood her pain. She didn't even take Minami's feelings into

consideration and to her, the distraught nurse might as well have never existed.

Still, Minami wiped her eyes and reached into her uniform pocket. She retracted a thick envelope and held it up. "I promised Yutaka that...you would get this...Konata."

Konata slowly turned back and saw Minami holding Yutaka's letter; her last written testimony for her cousin. She didn't know if she wanted to take it because she knew it would only make her cry even more. However, Konata was honest with herself and admitted that she wanted to know what Yutaka wrote about her. All Yutaka mentioned was that her letter gave the reasons why she wanted to be the one to die, a few fond memories they shared, and a few personal thoughts that she never shared with anyone, not even Minami or Yui.

The blue-haired woman slowly sat up and waited for the envelope when Kagami took it from Minami's grip and relayed it to her. Though Konata also wrote Yutaka a long letter, she was surprised just how thick and lengthy this one was as she struggled to open it and when she finally did, it was like pulling out a manuscript for a book. Konata took her time reading it and savored every word because she knew that each written expression was a porthole into the heart and soul of her departed cousin.

For nearly half an hour, Kagami and Minami watched Konata's green eyes bounce back and forth in her head and taking in every word. It wasn't until she arrived to the last page that they saw moisture in Konata's eyes thicken. They wondered what was hidden away in Yutaka's heart that was causing the blue-haired woman's emotions to flare until she finished. When Yutaka's words were silenced once again, Konata dropped the manuscript and

covered her face again. She let it all out again and cried loudly letting the tears slip through her fingers and down her arms as Kagami and Minami quickly raced over to hold her.

"Oh god...what have I done...?!" Konata cried. "I'm sorry, Miyuki! I'm so sorry! I never meant what I said...! Please forgive me!"

Minami knew what Yutaka had written on her final page and made the connection. She was able to overhear most of Konata's outburst from outside the room and knew that this was going to be very upsetting for the blue-haired woman when she finally reached that page. When Konata's rant was over, she saw Miyuki race out of the hospital room in tears while holding her uterus that she treasured now more than ever. A wound was inflicted onto her and her only words to Minami as she dashed past her was, "I can't do this anymore."

Minami gulped as she figured out the connection to what her doctor, friend, and former neighbor meant when she said that. She hoped and prayed that the pink-haired doctor was only vocalizing her dismay and wouldn't act impulsive, thus making the situation only worse. Regardless, Minami dried her eyes and stood tall.

"Konata...Yutaka's body is in the morgue and her sister has already begun making funeral arrangements. Normally we don't do this...but this is a special case. Would you like to see her one last time?" Minami asked, trying to keep her already broken self together.

Konata sniffed, looked up at Minami, her green eyes drenched in redness and water and simply nodded.

Escorting her in a wheelchair to allow her wound to keep healing, Minami pushed Konata through the hospital as Kagami followed and they took the elevator down a few floors. No one said a word the whole way. What more was there to say? Konata was about to see her cousin in a light that she never saw her before and she prayed that she never would have to. There were no chains of words that could even begin to comfort the blue-haired woman or put her mind at ease. Not only was her cousin dead, but one of things that kept her alive was now keeping her alive. Konata tried desperately not to think of this because it would only make her sick to her stomach and soul.

When the elevator doors opened, the cold breeze of death engulfed the three women as they stepped into the morgue. Minami wheeled Konata over to a panel of silver cabinet doors, each one containing a deceased body within them and it only added to the horrible scenario that played out for her. Taking keys from her pocket, Minami began to unlock a door with Yutaka's name on it and it only made her want to cry more. She was about to pull out the body of her friend, as if she was looking in a closet for an outfit to wear. She knew this was how hospitals operated and she had done this before but this was her friend from high school. It was a whole new ballgame when it was someone she loved and valued.

Minami opened the door and pulled the large panel holding Yutaka's body out. The short body was covered with a white sheet and when it was laid out before Konata's leaking eyes, Minami slowly retracted the sheet from the head and revealed Yutaka's body. Her skin was bleach white and she looked like a life-sized doll. She looked as if she was only sleeping and her hair still had its salmon pink color to it as she rested the sheet just before Yutaka's small breasts.

The green-haired nurse stepped aside and she and Kagami both agreed that they needed to give Konata time alone with her deceased cousin. They walked out of the morgue and watched her from behind the large swinging doors through the windows. For the first few minutes, Konata didn't say a word as she simply sat in her wheelchair and gazed at Yutaka's lifeless body. She was trying to burn her cousin's image into her brain until she blinked several times and wheeled herself closer.

"Yutaka...you were not just my cousin...you were my sister. I love you. I love you more than you could ever imagine. I never thought that this is where our story would end. Here I sit and I'm talking to you...but you can't answer me. You can't even hear me. You can't even hear me say I'm sorry. I read your letter...and I couldn't even do the one thing you asked me not to do. I'm sorry, Yutaka. I'm sorry I couldn't protect you...and I'm sorry for not fulfilling what you wanted of me. My only promise I can give from here on out is to fulfill your second request. I will live. I will live for you and honor your memory every day. I promise to always be faithful and loyal to Kagami and be there for her and her family." Konata spilled her heart gently and with a fractured voice.

As Minami and Kagami watched the scene unfold from their seclusion, Kagami turned to Minami. "I was wondering what was in Yutaka's letter that made Konata breakdown like that and apologize to Miyuki first."

Minami sighed. "Yutaka wanted Konata to promise her to never be angry and harbor any resentment against Miyuki. Yutaka knew exactly what she was signing up for and knew that Miyuki was only doing her job but she also had a feeling Konata wouldn't see it that way. It also said that Yutaka never viewed Konata as her cousin, even though she always acknowledged her as such. Instead, Yutaka always called Konata her sister."

Kagami looked at Minami. "So Konata's dream wasn't broken after all. She always had a sister in Yutaka...and a mother in Yui."

Minami slowly nodded.

"I must admit Minami that you're taking everything in stride. We're all upset, but you're still strong." Kagami noticed.

Minami nodded again. "That's the way Yutaka would want it. She would want me to be strong for her and not breakdown over her. I also harbor no resentment towards Miyuki because I know she was right in her decision. Konata did have a higher rate of survival than Yutaka and there was a high risk that Yutaka wouldn't have been able to survive the healing and recovery process. As much as it pains me to say it, I would've made the same decision if I was in Miyuki's place."

Kagami puckered her lips in growing emotions and slowly nodded and turned back to Konata still next to her cousin.

"So thank you, Yutaka. Thank you for always being there...even when you weren't. Thank you...for being my sister." Konata added as another tear fell from her eyes and she lifted her arm and placed her hand on Yutaka's cold forehead. "I promise I'll apologize to Miyuki when I see her again. Goodbye."

hurting her so deeply. It only made Konata feel even guiltier when she learned the pink-haired doctor was pregnant. Because Miyuki was who she was in her heart, she forgave Konata without a second thought and hugged her tightly.

Yui and her husband watched with the crowd as the funeral progressed and the realities of it became too real. For Yui, this was one of the most painful journeys of her life considering how deeply involved she was. She had killed another person and her little sister died all in the same night. It was an excruciating experience for everyone and even though it was over, the pain was still there and tearing everyone from the inside.

Nearly a week after the funeral, Konata was still a patient at the hospital. Recovering from a surgery of that scale took a long time to heal and she had received disheartening news from Miyuki upon further observation. Konata wasn't cured. She would never be cured. No matter what procedure or operation they could do, Konata would have her mother's disease forever and the only cure was death. However, they weren't completely without hope for once. The surgery did what it was supposed to and it short-circuited the disease's progress, but it didn't cure it. Instead, Konata was going to have to be on a long series of daily medications for the rest of her life and have a weekly injection. If she missed taking one pill, the symptoms would return and she would die from them. Other than that, Konata was going to live many, many more years and no one would ever be able to suspect she was hiding a disease within her.

Kagami visited her every day at the beginning of visiting hours and only left when the doctors practically had to force her out when the hours were over. This night as Kagami sat in Konata's hospital room, something amazing was about to happen.

As the twin-tailed woman sat and watched her silent lover continue to mourn her cousin's death, something caught her eye. A slight glow was shining outside the window and Kagami slowly stood and looked out the window and saw fire several stories below them. Was the hospital on fire? No. This was something else. She observed hundreds of small flames on the ground and it suddenly clicked in her mind. Kagami sighed, turned away from the window, and walked over to Konata, who was resting on her side with her back facing the window.

Kagami gently placed her hand on Konata's shoulder and whispered, making her lover look up. Kagami told her to let her take her outside for a minute but wouldn't say why. Konata didn't mind though because she felt numb inside and outside after seeing her cousin's body in the morgue last week.

It wasn't until Kagami rolled Konata outside into the night that that all changed. When Konata was pushed outside and looked into the hospital's parking lot, everything changed. People were there. Hundreds of people standing and facing her, each one holding a burning candle and some had tears in their eyes. A growing mountain of flowers rested at the hospital entrance with a framed picture of Yutaka standing next to it. One by one, each person stepped forward and added either a single rose or a full bouquet of flowers to the mounting pile next to Yutaka's picture.

Konata cried when she saw this incredible outpouring of support. So many faces. Some she recognized, some she didn't. It was the same for Kagami as she watched. She recognized some as her former associates at her firm before she lost it and the building went up into flames. They too held candles for Yutaka. Konata saw some of her fellow manga artists she had met at conventions over the years and saw Hiyori at the front of the crowd, also with a candle and crying as her husband stood next to her and held her

close. Others included fans of either Konata's work or Tsukasa's work who decided to come out and show their support.

Kagami looked around and she suddenly looked into the eyes of Tsukasa and Minoru with Aito and Kiyora in front of them. They too had candles and the children also had flowers and Kiyora also held her teddy bear close. Tsukasa bent down to her son and daughter, whispered to them, and they nodded. Kagami and Konata watched the two children approach them and lay the flowers next to Yutaka's picture and approach them. Aito approached Kagami.

"Aunt Kagami...I'm sorry...for how I treated you. I love you." Aito said with sadness but sincerity in his voice.

Kagami's heart began to melt as she bent down and opened her arms. She felt the warmth inside her rise when her estranged nephew hugged her tightly and the tears once again returned to the tsundere's eyes.

Kiyora on the other hand approached Konata as she sat in her wheelchair and hugged her teddy bear. Konata watched the little girl approach her and Kiyora made an unusual move for her shy nature. She held the teddy bear up to Konata, inviting her to take it. When Konata's trembling hands took the bear, Kiyora took another step towards Konata and spoke.

"When mommy was away on her trips, I was always so sad...until she gave me Mr. Huggles. He always made me feel better and...I hope he will make you feel better, too." She said with innocence. "We love you...Aunt Konata."

Those final words sent an arrow into Konata's heart and she held the bear to her face to mask her crying as the young girl hugged the petite woman in the wheelchair. Konata was accepted by their family and now the pain of being alone and away from her cousin was beginning to heal. Minoru placed his arm on Tsukasa's shoulder and pulled her close as the two parents watched with tearful eyes and with pride in their children.

When Aito and Kiyora returned to their parents, Kagami stood up and her heart leaped into her throat when she saw another face she recognized, though it wasn't Japanese. A foreign man stepped forth, also with a candle and Kagami recognized him as Mark Young, the fellow Law student she met in the United States and her emotions only deepened. She stepped forward and hugged him tight.

"I...I didn't expect you..." Kagami choked in her whisper.

"I wanted to be here. We're always here for you across the ocean if you need us, Kagami." He whispered back.

Kagami nodded as she disconnected the hug and the two stepped back. Mark Young stood in the crowd and to Kagami's further emotional fray, another old yet familiar face came forward; that of Misao Kusakabe. She was in deep emotional distraught as her crying eyes and puffy faced showed and she quickly hugged Kagami, who hugged her back.

"I...I...I never hated...Ayano." Misao whispered with a hiccup. "Every day...I wanted to apologize...but...now...she's...I'm the worst."

Kagami shook her head. "Don't say that, Misao. Ayano knew you loved her still. She told me all the time at work. Don't be too hard on yourself. We've all made mistakes here and let's pray that we can move forward."

Misao nodded and slowly went back into the crowd as the mourning continued. Kagami also scanned and saw Miyuki holding a candle side-by-side with a tall foreign man. Her husband. He also had a sad expression on his face while Miyuki cried as she held the candle. Minami Iwasaki also stood next to Miyuki and crying for her departed friend. What came next however shocked Kagami to no end when she saw the next people push their way to the front of the crowd.

She looked at Inori and Matsuri as they came forth with flowers and candles and to Kagami's utter shock, Miki was with them. She was release from jail after Shido was shot and killed but they hardly spoke a word when Miki found out about Kagami's choice in her new partner. This time however, Miki was here and also with a bouquet of flowers, a candle, and a crying face. She and her two eldest daughters placed the flowers down and all hugged Kagami. Miki made it a priority to maneuver to Konata and embraced the crying blue-haired woman.

All she could mutter was, "Welcome to the family...Konata-san."

Konata hugged Miki back and continued crying as everyone before them watched the scene. Yutaka Kobayakawa was dead and had left this world while everyone left behind was forced to cope with the loss of that incredible woman who was taken away so tragically, as were Tadao Hiiragi, Patricia Martin, and Ayano Minegishi. Konata and Kagami however took

comfort it the fact that they were no longer alone and the scene they basked in proved it as only more and more people approached the hospital with burning candles and bundles of flowers. Their numbness was beginning to thaw and the strength and warmth they once knew began to fill them.

A/N: Sorry about the long update. Had family from out of state visit so I was dealing with that. Anyway, stay tuned for the epilogue and I hope everyone enjoyed the story!

CHAPTER 24

"And those are the recent developments coming out of the Middle East. In other news, the fashion world was rocked by a bombshell last night when international icon, fashion designer, activist, and writer Tsukasa Shiraishi unexpectedly announced her retirement from the public spotlight. Shiraishi is renowned for her tell-all story of being raped as a teenager and rising to fame through designing clothes and speaking out against violence against women worldwide. Her Twitter and Facebook pages, as well as her personal website temporarily crashed when outcries from her fans and associates echoed their dismay over her decision. Shiraishi herself could not be reached for comment and her agent cited that the recent death of her assistant and best friend was the cause behind this decision, as well as other undisclosed family issues. Her agent also specified that Shiraishi's decision may have been motivated to spend more time with her children. We'll have more on this story as it develops. Turning now to sports..."

NINE MONTHS LATER

"Happy Birthday to you, Happy Birthday to you, Happy Birthday dear Kiyora! Happy Birthday to you!" The Hiiragi family sang to one of the youngest members as the young girl blushed heavily while staring at her large cake with eight burning candles on it.

When the singing was over, she blew all eight out which was followed by monumental applause from her family as they cheered for her, making her blush even more with the spotlight on her. Everyone saw how cute her reddening face was underneath her cone party hat as she looked up and gazed at her family. She felt her older brother hug her tight as her mother and father clapped for her. Shifting her eyes, she saw her Aunt Matsuri also clapping for her and her Aunt Inori was clapping her son's tiny arms for him while also smiling. Her grandmother, Miki, kissed her on her head as she began to cut the cake for everyone. Finally, she saw her Aunt Kagami and her lover and partner, Konata sitting side-by-side, also clapping.

As per tradition, the birthday recipient was given the largest slice of cake, much to Kiyora's liking as she didn't even wait for the others to get theirs before she started devouring it. Tsukasa instinctively tried to correct her daughter's lack of patience but also as per the budding tradition, Konata was there to swoop in and rescue her adopted niece. The blue-haired woman encouraged the young girl to devour the large piece, take no prisoners, and even fight for more. Though Kagami was annoyed that her lover was contradicting her sister's parenting methods, she was happy to see Konata back to her usual flamboyant and eccentric self. It was a long and difficult nine months for them after Yutaka Kobayakawa passed away.

The rest of the party was a vibrant experience for everyone, especially Kiyora. She had made off like a bandit with all the presents she was raking in from her family and all she felt that day was love. Even during the after party when everyone was relaxing, the fun didn't stop for the children. The small and petite Kiyora sat in Konata's lap holding a hand of playing cards

while her brother Aito sat in the taller Kagami's lap and playing against his sister.

"Aunt Kagami, is it okay if I ask you something?" Aito asked with curious though detectable reluctance in his voice.

Kagami picked up on this and was intrigued. "Of course, Aito-chan. You can tell me anything, you know."

Aito nodded and took a deep breath. "If you and Aunt Konata are in love... does this mean that our family is going to Hell?"

The dark and frightening question caught both Kagami and Konata completely off guard and they felt the pain strike their bodies. Both their hearts pounded and one of their worst fears was becoming a reality. They knew it was inevitable that it was only a matter of time until other children Aito and Kiyora went to school with caught onto the fact that their aunt was a lesbian. It was also only a matter of time until the parents of these children would tell gross inaccuracies about the truth between people of the same sex that loved each other, or children would just react on first instincts and say mean and wicked things without knowing of the ramifications.

"Wh...where did you hear this, Aito-chan?" Kagami asked while trying to remain calm and keep her anger bottled.

"Kyou-chan said it today at school. He said because you do...it...with Aunt Konata, we're all going to burn in Hell. I just don't know what 'it' means.

What does he mean, Aunt Kagami?" Aito asked as he laid a card down in front of his sister for her to make the next move.

Konata and Kagami quickly exchanged concerned looks with each other. The only comfort they were taking in this was the fact that they seemed to be more upset about it than the children. Kiyora was clearly confused by the whole scenario as her puzzled expression showed while Aito was also stumped by the unique family situation he was living in.

"It...it...it doesn't mean anything, Aito-chan. Let me tell you something. You know that I'm a woman and your Aunt Konata is also a woman and that we're both in love with each other, right?" Kagami asked.

Aito nodded as he watched his sister drop another card on the pile.

"And you know that your mother is a woman and your father is a man, right?"

Aito nodded again.

"Well, I'm sure you know this by now, but there are many different kinds of people in this world. There are people of many different colors and others have different beings they call God. Some people even have different... preferences...of who they want to be close with and who they want to fall in love with...but they're just like those people of different races and religions. What your Aunt Konata and I have is exactly what your parents have; a committed relationship between two people who love each other

and who love you two so much and would do anything for you two. And most of all, I don't want you to let anyone tell you that what your Aunt Konata and I have is wrong because like I said, we're committed to each other and we love each other, just like your mother and father love each other."

Aito was silent until he replied, "It's that simple?"

Kagami smiled. "Yep...it's that simple."

"I see...and you say you would do anything for us? Just like mama says she would?" Aito asked again.

Kagami's smile deepened, keeping Konata's enthusiasm alive. As Kagami readied herself to tell Aito yet another story about his life, neither she nor Konata noticed Tsukasa made her way from the kitchen towards the open doorway. When she saw the heartwarming sight of her two children sitting in her sister's and her friend's lap, she quickly ducked behind the door and listened as Kagami spoke.

"Let me tell you a story, Aito-chan. When you were born, do you know who it was who held you for the first time?" Kagami asked with a twinkle in her eye.

"Was it mama?"

"Nope."

"Was it papa?"

"Nope..."

"Well...who was it?"

Smiling, Kagami giggled. "It was me."

Aito looked up. "You?"

"Yep...that's right. I was in the delivery room with your mother and father. Before you were born, your mother was so scared about becoming a mommy so she wanted me there with her because we have a special bond. When you were born, your mother had a bit of a bleeding problem and she needed to be rushed away before she could even hold you for the first time. Your father had to go with her and so, there I was." Kagami reminisced. "I held you in my arms as you cried in your blanket and it was love at first sight. You were the first child of my sister, my best friend. It was when I held you that I vowed I would do anything for you and show you nothing but love."

Hearing this made Tsukasa's eyes flood and she covered her mouth to silence her whimpering. She quickly removed herself from the situation and

dashed out of the house towards the family shrine complex. It was her intention to visit another building that was recently added to the complex only a few months ago. She visited that place more than any other, mainly to pray and to say she was sorry.

Aito was very happy with his aunt's response as they continued playing their harmonious card game. Kiyora however couldn't help herself when she asked, "I have a question, too."

Konata and Kagami braced themselves for what the eight-year-old was about to ask them. They feared it had something to do with their relationship, or worse, how two women made love. They didn't want to talk about these kinds of topics with their niece and nephew but at the same time didn't want to lie to them either. The only thing they could do was hope it wasn't going to be too awkward after the dust would settle. Imagine their surprise when she asked a question of such innocence that only a child could comprehend it.

"Why do Aito and I have so many aunts?" She asked.

Upon hearing the question, Konata and Kagami couldn't help but look at each other and laugh. It was an astute observation by the young Kiyora and Kagami remembered she once asked her father the exact same thing when she was about the same age as her niece. His only response was a light chuckle and, "because the gods love me and our family." Konata couldn't help but kiss the top of Kiyora's head, making the young girl giggle at the ticklish touch. She then decided to take it a step further with mischief and formed her cat-like grin at her nephew, who to her delight, was becoming interested in manga ever since Konata's relationship with his aunt permanently cemented.

"Aito-chan, I know why you have so many aunts! You're lucky because you're surrounded by beautiful women so that's what we otakus refer to as a 'harem!' You could be like Yukinari Sasaki from Girls Bravo! Or better yet, like Tomoya Okazaki from Clannad! I could easily see you sweeping every girl you meet off their feet!" Konata exclaimed.

"Okay, okay, there!" Kagami reeled her lover in. "The boy is confused enough so the last thing we want to do is sauté his brain!"

As the bonding experiences continued between Konata, Kagami, Aito, and Kiyora, Tsukasa wished she had felt better times as she approached a newer building. As she walked in the cold, February day, she felt chills from both the weather and the memories when she eyed the shrine. Its shiny, polished wood reflecting in the sun showed how new it was and standing before it, Tsukasa tried to remain strong.

This place...this spot had so many trials and tribulations to it. Tsukasa stood at the entrance to the former Kagura-den where she was gang-raped as a teenager. The haunting images of her watching the structure go up in flames by her own hands made her feel endless guilt to the day. Even when the flowerbeds were planted as symbolism of rising from the ashes to create something more beautiful, this still didn't ease the pain. Though it was true Tsukasa had accepted the fact that that horrid crime had happened to her, it still hurt every now and then.

This new shrine however was built at not only her request, but was also funded out of her own personal bank account, which only showed how important it was to her. She slowly approached the wooden door and slid it

open and gazed at the four pictures of people she mourned and wept for on a nearly daily basis. In front of the pictures, four jars with incense sticks sticking out of them sat and waited to be lit and prayed upon. Tsukasa felt her eyes tighten with moisture when she saw the pictures of Tadao Hiiragi, Ayano Minegishi, Yutaka Kobayakawa, and Patricia Martin sitting side-by-side with black ribbons hanging on the upper right and left corners of the framed pictures behind the jars.

Tsukasa approached the four pictures, withdrew a book of matches from her pocket, and lit a single match. She lit the incense sticks and began to pray to herself for the souls of the people that were lost during this horrific ordeal. Tsukasa reveled in this silence as the memories of her high school friends and father continued to replay over and over again in her mind. The more they played though, the more emotional she became and felt responsible for the death of Patty. All Tsukasa wanted to do was say she was sorry to the departed golden-haired woman but it was too late in her mind.

A shadow suddenly cast itself across Tsukasa's body from behind and she quickly turned her head, trying to keep her traumatic memories under control. Her nerves eased themselves when her eyes met her husband as he slowly walked into the shrine and she slowly turned back to the pictures.

"You're not still blaming yourself for Patricia-san's death, are you?" Minoru asked as he stood behind his wife.

"It is my fault. I had no idea she had such a horrible childhood until sis told me and ever since I've felt nothing but guilt. All Patty wanted was friends and to belong. It was such a simple request and dream and she was beginning to find that when we went to high school. I took that away from her. I broke her dream." Tsukasa's voice became choppy as the tears neared.

Minoru placed his hands on Tsukasa's shoulders and gently pulled her closer to him. "We've been through this before, Tsukasa. What happened back then wasn't your fault. You made a mistake...but Patty made a choice. We should be grateful that she saw the error of her ways and made such a huge sacrifice for all of us and continue to pray for her and move on."

Tsukasa nodded. "I know, but when I retired from the public spotlight nine months ago, I did it so I could continue to be with our kids and teach them right and wrong and hopefully they wouldn't make the same horrible mistakes I did. I wish...I wish Yutaka...was here..."

Tsukasa covered her face as the tears slipped from her eyes and Minoru quickly acted. He pulled his wife close and Tsukasa hugged him tightly as she sobbed into his chest. He rubbed her head gently while holding her tight and allowing the woman he loved to vent her anguish over her departed friend.

"There, there, Tsukasa. We all miss Yutaka every day and we wish that she could still be here with us. But I don't want you for one second to question yourself as a mother because she's not around." Minoru said. "You're home with us now and the best way you can honor Yutaka's memory is to do what she wanted her cousin to do for her. Live for all of us, especially Aito and Kiyora. She loved our kids too, you know. Look around us; we are truly blessed with what we have. Our kids are happy and both healthy, our family is whole, our kids' futures are financially secured as are ours, and we're all together. I would say that Yutaka would be very happy for us if she was here. Wouldn't you?"

Tsukasa slowly pushed herself out of her husband's comforting embrace and looked around. She smiled and looked back at him. With a single and silent nod, she kissed him and thanked him for giving her such words of encouragement. She asked to be alone so she could talk to each of the departed individually, which her husband allowed.

He's right. I am very lucky and very blessed. I should be thanking my lucky star every day that I have a man like him who has stuck by me despite all I put him through in the beginning. He truly is a great man and a wonderful father.

When Tsukasa turned away and looked at the pictures, she approached her father's first. "Father...you were the first male role model in my life. You taught me the difference between right and wrong, good and evil, and how to be a strong person when you showered me with love as a child. I just wish I was a better daughter to you in the later years of my teenage life. I love you, father."

Tsukasa kissed the picture of her father and moved to the next one of Ayano Minegishi. "Ayano...you saved Kagami's life while sacrificing your own in the process without a second thought. You have proven that no matter what obstacles and mistakes you encounter or make in life, you can still find something so valuable to you that it's worth sacrificing yourself for. You are truly a gem among pebbles, Ayano Minegishi, and simply thanking you will never be enough to express my gratitude for what you did for Kagami. Thank you for saving my sis's life. We love you."

Tsukasa kissed the picture of Ayano and her emotions flared more when she arrived to Yutaka Kobayakawa's smiling picture. Letting a tear fall and splash on the wooden floorboards, Tsukasa sniffed and spoke. "Yutaka...I

cannot even begin to thank you for all you have done for me. You became my best friend when I reached the big times and I always needed you with me to prop me up, just like Kagami used to and as I did for her. You were like another sister for me and my children miss you every day, as do I. I just wanted you to know that no one could ever replace you and being on the road would never be the same without you...and that's one of the reasons why I retired. I'll make sure to tuck the kids in extra tight and give them each a longer kiss goodnight for them...just as you would want. I love you, Yutaka Kobayakawa."

Tsukasa kissed the picture of Yutaka and moved to the final picture of Patricia Martin. Tsukasa hesitated at first and followed it with a gulp until she sighed and continued her mourning. "Patty-chan...I'm sorry. That's all I can say. I'm so, so, sorry I did that to you and I pushed you over the edge. I never meant to hurt you or anyone else after I was raped. Believe it or not... I know what being bullied was like in middle school, too. It drove my parents crazy and it practically turned my sister into the tough woman she became when you met her. I just wanted you to know that I never hated you...I loved you...just like the rest of our friends and not a day goes by where I don't regret hurting you like that. If you can hear me now, all I ask for is your forgiveness. Please...watch over me, my family, and my children. Goodbye...Patricia Martin.

Tsukasa kissed the picture of Patricia Martin and finally stood. She wiped her eyes and with silence the only response from the pictures as the incense sticks still burned, Tsukasa walked to the exit of the memorial shrine. She slowly closed the door to allow the peace to once again settle on the shrine complex and as Tsukasa walked back to her old family home, she couldn't help but think of the irony behind Patty. Patty at one point desecrated the shrine, and now there was a memorial for her within it. Life was full of endless twists and turns.

When Tsukasa returned to the house, she saw the birthday party for her daughter was winding down as Konata and Kagami began readying themselves to leave. The two women stood at the front door of the house when Tsukasa came in through the back and she smiled when she saw Kiyora finish hugging the blue-haired woman. Aito also finished hugging Kagami and the two kids suddenly switched aunts and Kiyora wanted Kagami to pick her up, which she did with a happy sigh and kissed her on her head. Konata and Aito however were getting closer with each encounter and instead of hugging, they initiated their ritual handshake that ended with clashing knuckles.

Though the children begged their aunts to stay, Kagami suddenly noticed something about Konata that she had picked up on after being with her for so long. The blue-haired woman was becoming short of breath and she tried not to clutch her heart as it began to hurt. This meant Kagami had to get her to their car so she could take her medication as the symptoms began to return. Keeping the situation as calm as she could make it, Kagami signaled with her eyes and face that she needed to take Konata out of there to Tsukasa.

Tsukasa saw the signal and told Aito and Kiyora to come with her into the next room so they could play with Kiyora's new presents, which distracted them enough to allow Kagami to take Konata's hand and lead her out of the house. Konata continued to pant lightly as she clutched her chest while the pain continued to get worse inside her.

"Are you okay, Konata?" Kagami asked as they neared the car.

Still trying to make the best of a permanently bad situation, Konata grinned and replied, "I'll be just fine. As long as I have you, Nurse Kagamin, by my

side. That nurse's outfit I bought for you with the short skirt really turns me on, you know that?"

Kagami tightened her grip on her lover's hand with frustration as she blushed. "Shut up you perv or I'll give you an enema with my foot!"

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Her consciousness suddenly returned to her body and Kagami could feel herself waking up later that night. She rested comfortably in her bed and slowly stirred to find a better spot on her large mattress as she slowly opened her eyes to see the glowing alarm clock on her nightstand. The digital numbers suddenly changed to three o'clock in the morning when her eyes met the glow and she squeezed them shut. Yawning quietly, Kagami rolled over to the other side of the bed and tried to hug her lover and partner, Konata.

Déjà vu suddenly struck when Kagami hugged an empty and cold spot on her bed and she lifted her eyes again. Seeing her lover was gone, she quickly sat up and gazed around her large penthouse apartment. She saw the bathroom door was open and the lights were off inside so Konata wasn't in there. Kagami suddenly heard a faint noise coming from outside her bedroom door and in the living room. It sounded like light crying so she pulled herself up and investigated the noise.

Kagami opened the door and peered out into her spacious living room and saw her blue-haired bundle of love curled at one end of her sofa while holding a pillow to her chest and crying into it. The twin-tailed woman

sighed to herself and regretted that this was happening again. She initiated her protective side and approached the crying Konata and slowly sat down next to her, who continued to sob.

"Hey you..." Kagami whispered with remorse. "You still miss Yutaka... don't you?"

Konata halted her crying and slowly looked up, showing her crying face. "Ye...yes...but that's not why...I'm...crying..."

"Then tell me what's wrong, dear?" Kagami asked.

Konata slowly raised her hand and pointed to her laptop sitting on the end table next to the sofa. "I couldn't sleep...so I tried playing some games... but then...I checked...my email. Mi...Miyuki...she...emailed me. Open it and see..."

As the blue-haired woman sank her face into the pillow again, Kagami stood and walked over to the end table and opened Konata's laptop. The screen lit up again and it showed Konata's email account was open to a new email she received from Miyuki in Sweden. It didn't take long for Kagami to see what triggered this new crying session for Konata. Miyuki had her baby only a few hours ago and the pink-haired doctor wanted Konata and Kagami to be the first ones to see. A photograph was enclosed and it showed the flushed and sweaty Miyuki with her long pink hair a sporadic mess and she held a newborn baby girl in her arms. Her husband, Jakob, was also in the picture as the two parents smiled deeply as their baby

continued to cry. However, what hit Konata the hardest was when she read that Miyuki had named her daughter Yutaka.

Kagami fought back a tear of her own as she stood back and sat back down next to Konata. "That...that was so sweet of Miyuki. That just shows what kind of person she is on the inside."

To Kagami's surprise, Konata began to wail louder and replied with her face still nestled in the pillow. "I know...but what I did to her! I'm still haunted by what I said to her...and I even made her quit being a doctor...!"

As Konata resumed her crying, Kagami reminisced and sighed. It was true that what Konata said to Miyuki after the blue-haired woman learned of her cousin's fate hurt her deeply, but Miyuki already forgave Konata even before she apologized. However, just when Konata was beginning to feel better about herself, she received disheartening news from Miyuki that she surrendered her license to practice medicine at her own free will. It came only two months after Yutaka Kobayakawa passed away and Konata was convinced that it had to do with what she said. Though that wasn't true, Miyuki would never admit it but it had a lot to do with the mental strain the case put on her. She remembered her nervous breakdown in the operating room and Miyuki believed that if she nearly lapsed in her professionalism once, it was bound to happen again. It was the strenuous case and her desire to be a mother that made her surrender her dream of being a doctor.

"Konata...we've been through this before. Why Miyuki quit being a doctor had absolutely nothing to do with you or what you said to her. It was a choice she made for her own life and in my opinion, it was a great one. Did you see how happy she looked in that picture with her daughter?" Kagami asked and wrapped her arms around Konata's shoulders and pulled her

close. "All Miyuki has in her body to give is love and that's the only emotion she can even comprehend. I say that she'll be a great mother like Tsukasa is and the world will be a better place with someone in it that's raised by Miyuki. You need to move on, Konata. I know Miyuki isn't holding any grudges so why are you holding one against yourself?"

Desperate to feel more comfort from Kagami, Konata dropped the pillow and scooted herself closer and closer to Kagami's lap until the twin-tailed woman took it from there. Kagami scooped Konata up from under her legs, lifted her up, and guided her to her lap and held her closely as the blue-haired woman continued to cry. Kagami held Konata tightly and rocked her gently and kissed her on the top of her head.

"I just...I just want all this pain and uncertainty to be over." Konata sniffed. "I don't want to be sick anymore, I want to be able to work again, I want us to be productive again. You know, I try my best to put on a strong and energetic face for your niece and nephews when we visit them...but sometimes it's so damn hard. Whenever I start to think about Yutaka...I just...I just...I don't know...! I just get so upset and there's nothing I can do about it except cry! I just want to go back to normal again!"

Kagami slowly nodded. "I know, Konata, I know. It has been hard for us these past nine months with us not being able to find work. I know that you and Hiyori have been trying to find work but no one wants to hire you or sign you to a contract because of your disease and no one wants to cover you in their health coverage. The same goes for me after I gave up my license to practice Law to be with you. But we're trying and that's what matters. Did you know that last week I got an email from Mark Young in America?"

Konata looked up and shook her head. "The student you met during your abroad session?"

Kagami nodded. "He emailed me and offered me an opportunity to become a lawyer in the United States after I would be certified by the American Bar Association. If I chose to accept it, it would mean that I would only be allowed to be a lawyer in America."

Konata sniffed again. "And you didn't take it?"

"I told him that I was grateful for the offer and that I have a friend like him, but I don't want to uproot everything here in Japan and move anywhere. I want to stay right here with you and my family, which you are now a part of." Kagami replied. "I know that the unknown is scary and a few years ago that would've left me catatonic in fear. But I have you with me, Konata, and you have me. You take all of my fears away, Konata. And if someone like Mark, who lives in another country on the other side of the globe, is so willing to bend over backwards for us, that's got to mean we have a great support system and two women as strong as we are cannot stay down forever, right?"

Konata felt a small smile start to tug at her mouth and she slowly nodded. "I love you, Kagami Hiiragi. I know you know all of this already, but I still want to say it again so you'll never forget it. From here on out, I'll never let you be alone. Look me in the eyes so I know you know, Kagami. I'll wrap you in my arms and I'll never let go...and I'll always be your reason why."

Kagami smiled, lowered her head, and connected her lips with Konata's. "You're my treasure, Konata. I could not and I would not be able to picture my life without you. You're the only one I could ever be comfortable with like this, so please don't be hard on yourself about this thing with Miyuki. And don't let anyone tell you that you're not worth anything because of what you have on the inside. I'll always stay by your side and take care of you. Now, let's go back to bed. I'll wear that special uniform for you..." Kagami said seductively and lifted her lover up as Konata giggled.

Kagami carried Konata in her arms back to the bedroom and even though it was late, Kagami never grew tired of Konata's touch and the feeling was mutual for Konata. The two women kissed each other deeply while exploring every part of themselves in the heat of the passion and it wasn't long until they were both asleep again. They fell asleep in the embrace of each other, and the fears of uncertainty.

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When Konata felt the warmth of the brightening lights hitting her eyelids, her intuition was telling her it was the morning sun shining through the windows and it was time to wakeup. She slowly lifted her eyelids and to her surprise, a bright white light consumed her. This wasn't the morning sun, this was something else and Konata felt herself being consumed by it as she looked forward into the white abyss. As she felt herself being lifted upward into this whiteness, she heard thousands of voices all around her and she feared that her number may have been called after all. Was she now ascending into the afterlife? Konata closed her eyes and waited for it to be over.

The light suddenly faded and to her surprise, she felt a soft wind tickle her and cool her face while she could hear its faint howl sound across the area. The sudden chirps of birds furthered her curiosity and the blue-haired woman slowly began to lift her eyelids. When the vision in front of her cleared, she never expected to be sitting in paradise. Konata sat on the top of a grassy meadow on a warm summer day under a large tree. The sky above her was a perfect shade of blue, just like her hair color as streaks of white clouds also flew by in the upward sea. Shifting her eyes downward, Konata's heart began to pound when she saw thousands of colorful flowers dancing in the breeze and this all looked too familiar. When Konata looked down and saw her wardrobe had changed from her pajamas into a white, glowing silk dress, she feared she knew what was coming next.

"My oh my, I cannot believe how much you've matured over the years...my dear." A voice said from behind Konata.

She quickly turned around and Konata's fear reached new levels when she saw her mother, Kanata Izumi, standing before her, also wearing the same white and glowing dress. Her long blue hair wafted in the breeze as she smiled while looking down at her daughter with such a complacent expression. Her skin was pale and delicate like a newborn and everything about her was peaceful. Konata on the other hand had a face of fear and dread, as if her mother was the grim reaper coming to take her away from Kagami.

"M...mommy...?" Konata choked.

Kanata slowly nodded. "Yes...and I don't think I'd be able to hold you in my arms anymore...so would it be okay if I sat and joined you?"

Unable to comprehend what was happening between being in this new mysterious place and talking to her dead mother, Konata slowly nodded with a perplexed look and Kanata gracefully accepted the invite. She slowly sat down next to her daughter and the two women stared forward at the flowers.

"They're beautiful, aren't they?" Kanata asked casually as she watched the dancing stems of color.

Konata gulped. "Um...yes...they are. Um...mom...?"

Kanata turned her head to look at her daughter while keeping her smile. "Yes, dear?"

"Where...where am I?" Konata asked and dreaded the answer.

Instead of giving her a straight answer, Kanata deepened her smile and turned back to look at the flowers. "I'm sure you're very confused, Konata, but all that will pass eventually. I just wanted to say to you how proud I am of you. The things you have done for other people over the years as I had to stand back and watch you from another view. I know the Hiiragi family is eternally grateful for your presence there and what you have done for Kagami."

"...Kagami...I love her so much..." Konata whispered as her eyes flooded.

Kanata lifted her arm and placed her hand on her daughter's head. Konata instantly felt a warming sensation that began to radiate new feelings of tranquility into her body, though this only furthered her fears that she was dead. Kanata gently rubbed her daughter's head with tender loving care until she retracted her arm and continued to sit and look forward at the flowers.

"I know you do, Konata. I saw it in your heart from the very first day you laid eyes on her when you started high school." Kanata replied. "You and Kagami have worked so hard to be at where you two are now and have fought against such incredible odds. If you can believe it, I knew who you were on the inside before I even had you. A true mother knows because I carried you for nine months after all."

"Then you also know that it would kill me if I was ever forced to leave her." Konata whispered as she looked down. "I love her and her family so much...and here I am giving all I can to them."

Kanata continued to stare forward until she smiled again and said, "Look."

Konata looked forward and suddenly saw something in the fields of flowers. She saw a young girl with budding twin pigtails on each side of her head running and laughing happily through the field. Something about this girl looked strangely familiar.

"Is...is that...?" Konata asked. "What's going on here?"

Kanata giggled. "Nothing, dear. Nothing at all. I just wanted to see you again...and to tell you how proud I am of you and that you have nothing to fear in life."

"Nothing to fear? Kagami and I are jobless and every day is a struggle." Konata quickly retorted. "We're eternally grateful that Tsukasa is there to help us every now and then but we cannot find work. Is this our punishment for being...together? As two women?"

Kanata quickly turned her head and shook it. "Not at all, dear. Consider this just another test to reinforce your faith in not only each other, but also the ones above you. Don't get caught up in what society says about you... because they are wrong and only acting out of fear. In this world I am a part of, we do not conform to strict rules that tell us what we can and cannot do. We do not judge on who you call your lover or your savior. We sit back, observe, and ultimately judge you on one thing. The actions of your heart. If your actions on Earth are pure and you only have the best intentions for yourself and the ones you love...then you will always be a part of us. Never forget that, my daughter. However, I believe that there's someone else that would like to talk to you."

A sudden whoosh of wind came from behind and it took Konata by surprise as she shielded herself from the blasts while Kanata continued to sit and let the wind play with her long hair. The late Izumi continued to watch the young Kagami Hiiragi run and play in the flowery meadow and glanced up, seeing the wind was catching the cherry blossom petals in its grasp and floating them to Kagami. As the cherry blossom petals began to rain down on the young girl, they began to stretch into long threads and change from pink to blue. It caught the young girl by surprise as the collage of blue continued to fall all around her as the wind died down.

"Hello, Konata." A new voice said.

Konata's eyes suddenly shot open and she turned her head. Her vision in her wide eyes became fuzzy as the tears rose when she saw Yutaka Kobayakawa standing before her, also in a white and glowing dress. The blue-haired woman slowly turned and outstretched her trembling hands, hoping this wasn't a dream. She felt the torso of her cousin and it was a solid human being she was touching. Konata wanted to stand and hug her cousin tightly but her knees felt like jelly and she couldn't move so Yutaka slowly bent down to her knees and embraced Konata.

"I...I thought you were...dead..." Konata whimpered as she hugged her tighter.

"As long as you always think of me and remember me...I'll never die, Konata." Yutaka whispered and pulled out of the hug. "I just wanted to say thank you. Thank you for doing what I asked of you. For living for me and always taking care of Kagami. She needs you most of all."

Konata sniffed as her departed mother watched keenly. "I...I just wished it could've been me and not you..."

Yutaka raised her hand to her cousin's face and caught a tear as it slid down her face. "If that would've happened, then my dream of your happiness would've been broken. Look at how much happiness you have brought the Hiiragi family in their time of need after Tadao was murdered. You're needed on Earth for awhile longer, dear cousin."

Konata sniffed again and looked up at Yutaka with watery eyes. "But...but I still miss you, Yu-chan. I miss you every day."

"And I miss you too, Konata. However, it's better this way. I'm at peace now and I've never been happier. I know it hurts you deeply, but please take comfort in this message. I love you, and so does Kagami...but she needs you the most. One day, we will be reunited...but until then...go and live and love in peace...my cousin." Yutaka whispered and pulled Konata close.

The blue-haired woman released more tears when she felt her cousin's warm lips make contact with her forehead and when she felt the sensation, the bright white light returned. When Konata opened her eyes, she was in the sea of white again and her mother and Yutaka stood before her. Kanata stepped forward towards her crying daughter and pulled her close.

"Before we go I want you to know...that you were and still are my jewel, Konata; my most prized possession. You've done so much and have worked so hard to get to where you are now and have overcome so much. Please listen to your cousin; live and love in peace. I look forward to meeting my daughter-in-law one day." Kanata whispered and kissed her daughter on her right cheek.

They slowly backed away and the white light became brighter and brighter to a point where Konata could barely see them anymore. She cried out and pleaded for them to stay with her but it couldn't be done for them. The last thing Konata was able to see was the green in Yutaka's eyes and her mother's. She was swallowed by the light and suddenly, there was darkness.

The last thing she felt was a deepening pit in her stomach, as if she was falling down really fast until she felt a jolt in her system.

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Konata's body jumped and she awoke with a start. Feeling her heart beat rapidly and her breath entering and exiting her lungs at a fast pace, the confused blue-haired woman looked around and suddenly spotted a sleeping person next to her. It didn't take long to see the messy long hair of Kagami Hiiragi resting next to her and sleeping soundly. Konata looked at the clock on the nightstand, seeing the time stated four-thirty in the morning.

What a dream...but thank God it was only a dream.

The memory of it replayed in her mind but Konata suddenly couldn't remember most of it. She remembered whiteness, green grass, and a tree. She could also hear female voices that weren't her own in her mind but they both sounded familiar and Konata tried to remember as she sat up and listened to Kagami snore lightly.

Live and love in peace.

Those five simple words echoed in Konata's mind and she suddenly felt better about herself. Her depression was gone and even though Yutaka was still deceased, Konata felt better about it though still sad that she had to lose her. The strength and enthusiasm that gave Konata so much life and

personality before was returning slowly but surely. The fears of the unknowns and everything else Earth had to offer were still there to a certain extent, but she had a weapon by her side that would never fail her: Kagami.

It took them some time to realize it, but both Konata and Kagami were always each other's dreams. Battered at times in their pursuits to find each other, but never broken. Feeling sublime, Konata rested her body next to the woman she loved with a smile on her face and began to feel for Kagami's hand. She eventually found it and intertwined the fingers and held her tight. She was no longer going to drag on her anguish as she felt herself become tired again and slowly nod off to sleep with the slumbering Kagami in her arms. As Konata drifted off with the woman she loved, she didn't even notice the two lip marks on her face; one on her forehead, and one on her right cheek.

Konata soon fell asleep again and began to dream with Kagami. Together, none of their dreams were broken.

THE END

A/N: And there you have it! Hope it was a good read and let me know what you think! Special thanks to all the readers and supporters! This one was for you guys! Thanks again!